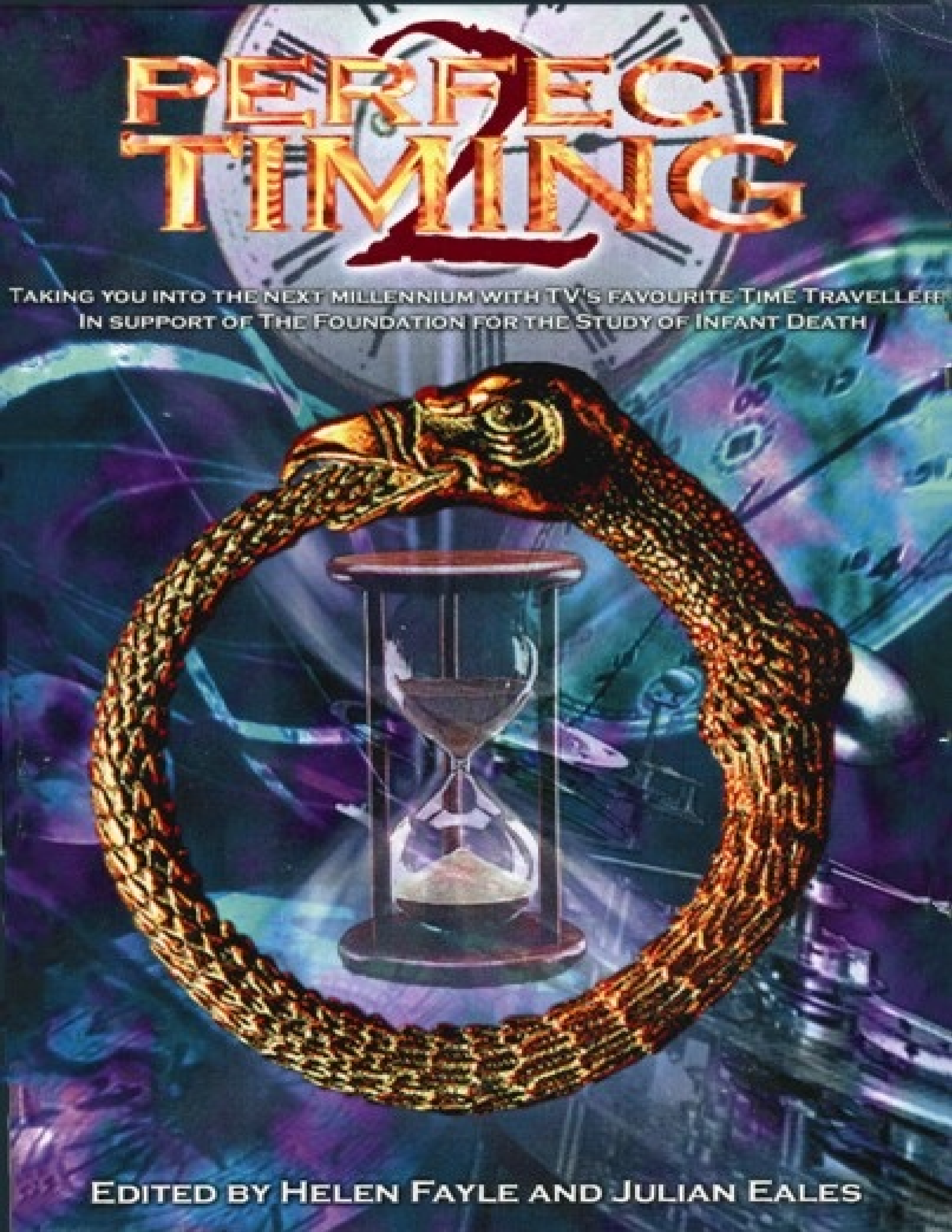

PERFECT TIMING 2

Taking you into the next millennium with TV's favourite Time Traveller
In support of The Foundation for the Study of Infant Death

Edited by Helen Fayle and Julian Eales

Perfect Timing

A collection of Short Fiction taking you into the next millennium with "The Doctor".
Collected in support of The Foundation for the Study of Infant Death.

Edited by Helen Fayle and Julian Eales
Introduction by Colin Baker

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December 3rd 1999

The Editors would like to thank everyone who contributed to this collection - not only to those whose works appear inside, but those who supported us by sending in their contributions, and who made a donation for last year's book and helped to make this project such a success. There isn't room to thank you all in person, but you know who you are!

Special thanks to: Shaun Lyon of "Outpost Gallifrey" and The Doctor Who Alliance; Tom Beck and the Friends of Doctor Who; Selina Lock, the folks of Timebase/Helical Scan; Scott Goodman, Comics International, David Brunt, David Wright, Forbidden Planet Nottingham (big thanks to Debbie and Phil!); Lawrence Miles, Stephen Bagley for the website design, Kristoffer Lawson, Tuomas Toivonen, and Teemu Hukkanen at Fishpool (www.fishpool.com) for web hosting,

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Message from Colin Baker

I am delighted to have the opportunity of thanking you for purchasing this excellent book in aid of The Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths (FSID).

Friends of the Doctor in his many guises worldwide have always been most generous in their support of our charity, with which I became involved when my baby son, Jack, died a few short weeks before I was due to start filming Doctor Who.

As a result of our Reduce the Risk Campaign in 1991, we have already achieved more than many of us ever dared hope in significantly reducing the numbers of families who experience the dreadful and tragic loss of their babies. But while there are still babies dying for no apparent reason, we will continue to work hard to discover the causes of Cot Death, by raising money so that we may fund research, until the day when no one ever again goes through the heartbreak of losing a child in this devastating way. And with your help, we will do it.

By supporting the work of the writers, artists, the editors Helen Fayle and Julian Eales, and everyone else who has so generously given their talent, time and energy to this project, you are also helping FSID in its quest to give every baby "the chance of a lifetime". And it is hard to think of any cause more worthwhile than that of saving a baby's life. Your support is invaluable.

Thank you all very much for buying this book. I hope that you enjoy being transported on these new and imaginative journeys in the TARDIS!

Colin Baker Chairman - FSID

Foreword: Happy Times And Places...

By

Dez Skinn

Dez *was the first Editor of the then "Doctor Who Weekly", 20 years ago...*

Not too sure exactly what I meant by that, but it was the sign-off I used editorially when I finally got Doctor Who Weekly off the ground. But, whether Marvel UK's Kentish Town offices were happy places, they certainly were happy times... mainly because I realised a long-held ambition. I'd always felt that the BBC's science fiction series deserved much more than a mere two pages in TV Comic each week.

A few years earlier I'd edited House of Hammer, a magazine that took a household name and expanded upon the screen adventures. With comic strips and with features. Something of a template for Doctor Who Weekly. Also producing a science fiction magazine, Starburst, I felt an ideal companion would be a Doctor Who title. But Polystyle Publications had the rights tied up for its two bloody pages a week. What a waste!

Then, in 1979, their licence expired and, quick as a flash, I had a meeting with BBC Enterprises, licensor of all creatures British and Broadcastable. Back in those pre-Star Wars days, getting the rights to produce magazines from film and TV was an absolute doddle. It was viewed as much as a promotion for their properties as a profit centre. Roy Williams, head of the Beeb's sales folk, was an absolute sweetheart, who had the decency to keep a bottle of malt whisky in his office at all times. Hmmm, come to think of it, so did Michael Carreras at Hammer Films. Maybe there was an ulterior motive for working with these guys!

Whatever. Marvel was the company I was working for by 1979 so they lucked in. They got Doctor Who (and Starburst for that matter, as they took the whole package when they hired me: my office furniture, my SF monthly - complete with 25,000 back issues - and my ideas). It was a sweet deal.

Promoting the title was a dream come true as the then-Doctor, Tom Baker, and I toured the country hyping the new weekly. A favourite scrapbook item from the time being something which managed to alienate the entire science fiction literature community in one foul swoop. Tom and I attended Worldcon '79, held in Brighton, as did thousands of SF fans and celebrity authors including Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov and countless more. So when The Guardian gave the event a half page of coverage, whose faces did they choose to run to visualise and epitomise the science fiction book world? Tom and I. Ooops, didn't go down too well with the hardened fans, but helped us launch the title with a staggering 150,000 copies.

That it still exists today, and has entertained generations as well as making careers for many a writer, artist and editor is a testament to the eternal appeal of a nigh-eternal Time Lord.

Happy times and places,
Doctor Dez.

Alien Nation
By
Peter Anghelides

Don't even think about crossing us, evading us, or challenging our long-held rights. One way or another, you will pay the price.

All these years, we've been watching, waiting. We're prepared to act in our master's best interest. We will authorise you. Defy us, and there will be disappearances.

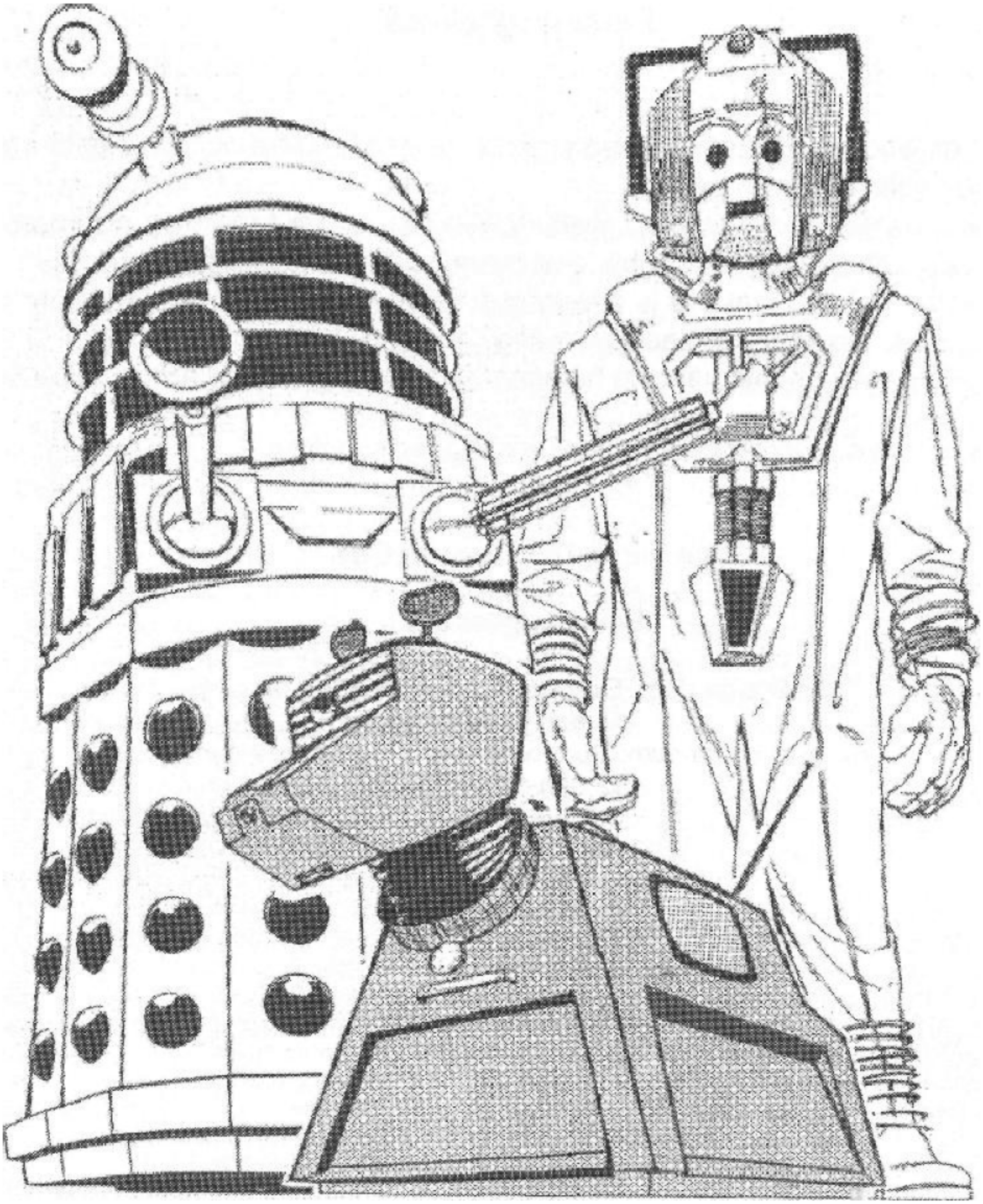
Let no-one fool you that this is a laughing matter, whatever you may have heard of our other activities. Do you ever see us smiling?

Every alien race should have its human agents, though some are more expendable than others.

Kneel before our demands. We are Terry Nation's muscle.

I'll Name That Tune In One
By
Peter Anghelides

THUMPa da dum. Dum ba da dum. Dum ba da dum.
Di duh da dum.
Ba dum ba da dum. Dum ba da dum. Dum ba da dum.
Di duh da dum.
Whaaoooooooo whaaaaa-
(Ba da di duh da dum
di duh da dum
di duh da dum
dum dum da da)
Dee daah doooommm
Dee duh dooooooooooo
(Ba da di duh da dum
di duh da dum
di duh da dum)
Duh doooooo
Whaaoooooooo whaaaaamm
(Da da di duh da dum)
Whaaaaamm
(Da da di duh da dum)
Whaaaaamm
(Da da di duh da dum)



Past

Simple (layperson) definition: "Any point in time which is, relative to one's own usual direction of travel, backwards". However, this is an unhelpful definition in terms of either travel or engineering. The word "past" can be applied to moments in time relative to oneself, certainly; but it can also be applied to moments relative to Presidential Standard Time (Gallifrey). So which of these is the "true" past?

In fact, the present should be considered as an axis rather than a single point, stretching between one's own time and time as it's perceived on the homeworld. Ergo, it's no longer possible to describe the past as a sequence of events. The past is an *area*, with the present at one edge, and the two primary moments of creation - the creation of existence (Event One) and the creation of the traveller's own consciousness - in its far corners.

The lesson? That events can never be described as merely existing at one point in time or another, and that lost moments in history can't simply be slotted into spaces between events which have already been witnessed. If anything, the past has to be *mapped* rather than catalogued. All events, no matter how small, have a geometry extending between the two *nows* and the moments of creation... but by definition, the traveller will never truly be able to visit the past, as he'll always take one end of the present with him wherever he goes.

If the past is indeed another country, it's one that even a Time Lord will never have the chance to visit himself. He will, however, cross the paths of many refugees.

- *Prinicipia Prinicipalis,* third item on the recommended reading list, Arcalian Chapter Pre-Academy Induction School (suggested reading age: five years, two months).

Darkness Before Me

By

Jim Campbell

There are gulfs of space so vast that for a three-dimensional mind even to attempt comprehension is to skirt the very boundaries of madness; voids so great that by the time the light from a distant sun has crossed them, the nuclear fires which originated that light have long grown cold and dark.

Here, there is perfect void with barely even an atom of hydrogen to mar the majesty of emptiness... except for this one object:

To a superficial eye, this object is primitive in form; essentially a cube elongated by approximately a factor of two along its Y-axis. There is some irrelevant surface detail and it would appear to be blue in colour, were the pallid light of far-off stars sufficient to illuminate it. The object is stationary in three-dimensional space, but rotates slowly around its X-axis; unusual in its location, but unremarkable in any other respect.

Or so I would have you believe.

As with all illusions of time and space, understanding comes with a simple change of perspective.

Look inside.

A three-dimensional mind cannot reconcile what is within and without. The first chamber which greets you is perhaps sixteen times the size of the external dimensions in both X and Z axes, and this is but the first of many rooms. Do not cling to the concepts of 'within' and 'without' for they will not serve you well here.

Let us remain in this first chamber for a moment, for here we find the Other. He looks like you, but he is not: this is the cloak of flesh the Other chooses to wear, until circumstances dictate or he chooses otherwise. In this place where illusion reigns, do not be deceived by the Other's apparent age, by his slight build and evident frailty.

There is a will like steel beneath this facade and depths as unimaginable as the spaces which unfold within the elongated blue cube that I present to you as my outer form. You should no more believe the reality of his external appearance than you should mine. The Other is my keeper, and I am his.

Were you able to see with my eyes, you would see the fourth axis, the one for which you have no name. You would see the trail of his past stretching out behind him, the possibilities, cumulative effects of apparently unconnected decisions, the impact of random acts of chance which have brought him to this chamber at this moment which three-dimensional minds call 'now'.

Were you able to see with my eyes, you would see the path of his future as clearly, as it stretches away before him, he will turn to leave this chamber and...

And...

What lies ahead is unclear. This is unprecedented. Uncertainty shrouds all possibilities. Since the moment of my inception I have known all the threads of circumstance which intersect my own for the entire duration of my consciousness. This can only be the result of an act by another: as a defence, I close off those aspects of my being yet functioning and consider my course of action.

I am afraid.

And yet...

And yet, the thrill of uncertainty permeates my being. I must see what transpires. The Other entered this chamber in order to gain access to some of my systems and yet I cannot believe that he would do this to me.

I must understand. I will observe: now he turns to leave, now he begins passage down the first of many corridors...

The lighting flickered erratically as the Doctor turned away from the helm of the TARDIS. A spasm of pain ran up his left leg as he picked up the pace. He *looked down at makeshift bandage around his thigh. Small patches of blood were seeping through the material, blossoming like flowers.*

No time *for that. How ironic.*

By leaning heavily against the wall, the Doctor found that he could effect a rapid walk, though each step caused him pain. There was fire in his side every time he drew breath; at least two of his ribs were fractured.

Passing many doors and archways both left and right, the Doctor pressed onwards until he reached an unremarkable alcove. A small panel in the wall slid back to reveal a translucent octagonal plate behind; he pressed the palm of his hand against it.

Nothing. Access to the Transit Tubes was closed to him, nothing to do but continue on foot. The hard way.

The corridor swam around him, its geometries warping in front of his eyes, waves of nausea crashing over him. He stopped for a moment, feeling the contusion on his skull under the mane of thinning white hair. Concussion, too, it would appear. All things considered, he had been in better shape.

This body was getting too old for this kind of foolishness. That was something he would have to consider, assuming he survived the problems at hand.

The Doctor paused. He had arrived at a five-way intersection: here, a passageway leading to the Astrocartography suites; here, a short walk to the library of cryptography, resonant with the silence of dead languages; here...

This was not right. He had just passed this way and yet never seen this intersection before, these chambers were not located this close to one another. Or at least, they had not been so. The internal structure of the Ship was reordering itself minute by minute. Things were getting worse.

Keeping his injured leg straight, the Doctor pressed his back to the wall and slid slowly to the floor. He fumbled through the pockets of his coat, until he found the tellurium ring on which jangled a confusing array of objects, all dissimilar in form and composition. Some were thin metallic cylinders, others strange crystalline formations. At least one was a liquid, held in some semblance of shape by a tiny focussed energy field-generator suspended at its centre. However, they all served the same basic purpose.

Keys. The Doctor almost smiled to himself. He had never quite been able to work out what it was with Time Lords and keys, but he suspected that, once the layers of intellectual justification and psychological analysis were stripped away, it was *something as primitive and foolish as magpies' affinity for shiny objects.*

He hauled himself across the floor to a panel whose fit was so perfect that one might never have seen it without already knowing it was there. The hemispherical glass key pressed down into a shallow indentation at its centre and the hatch slid aside with a soft hiss.

The ladder disappeared down into darkness. Assuming, of course, that down was still down...

I feel regret as I see the Other turn away from the Transit Tube, but if I must protect myself from my unknown foe I cannot allow free access to any, not even him. I hope he will understand. He stumbles as he turns away, appearing unsteady.

For a moment, I feel overwhelming fear that he will fall... and then the moment passes as he regains his balance. How can three-dimensional beings live like this, in a constant flux of uncertainty and fear, stumbling blindly into futures of which they have no awareness?

As he continues down this passageway, he leaves the echoes of the moments that pass behind him like a ghostly trail... is this to be my fate? To see only what has already passed and to live only in each fleeting instance of 'now', afraid of the darkness before me?

I will not allow this. Whoever has done this to me has knowledge equal to that of the Other.

This realisation chills me to the cores of my being. I must conceal and defend the parts of me which are vulnerable: the axes of three-dimensional space are still subject to my will; the merest suggestion and they remake themselves to my new design, form follows thought and it is done.

My assailant will not triumph without opposition, and I can only hope that the Other understands my intent.

The botanical gardens covered hectares, specimens carefully planted by planet of origin to avoid unwanted cross-pollinations, hedged in by unseen energy-fields, each zone basking in its own, precisely controlled micro-climate. The weeping glass trees of Sycadalon leeching crystalline salts from radioactive, rain; the shard-roses of Hispiera II basking in ultraviolet radiation that would kill a man; the semi-sentient fungal colonies of the Tarranin Ring shrouded in yellow sulphur-mists...

Doors hummed shut behind the Doctor and he reeled, staggered and fell. The icy wind gusted at storm-force, flinging hail and snow at him like frozen bullets. All around him, foliage blackened and died, velvet petals were ripped from branches and strewn across the snowy ground like confetti. Species which *had become extinct before the first sentient life forms on their planets spoke their first words now issued unheard screams and died.*

The Doctor would have wept, if only for the blood-orchids of Regia Prime. The Holy Order of the Etheretics had tended their fragile gardens for millennia before a chronoclastic fracture had torn their world asunder and erased it entirely from the timestream. Even in this place, where beginnings and endings shed their meaning, it was still possible to lose some things forever.

But he knew, as he clawed his way back to his feet and pressed on in the teeth of the savage wind, that now was no time for sentiment. He would surely freeze to death unless he made haste, although he noted grimly that the intense cold was, at least, numbing the pain.

Why?

Why will he not see my predicament and take shelter whilst I do what must be done in my own defence? I must seek out my assailant and neutralise its threat, the Other must understand this.

Why will he not take refuge when all I can do is bar his path? I see him now, bent almost double against winds that threaten to tear the very flesh from his bones. He must stop, he *must* allow me the freedom to destroy this threat to my being without concern for his safety.

The Other is already injured: the contusion to his skull sustained when...

When... when a safety door closed as he attempted to pass through. Designed to contain an escape of toxic gas or seal an area of vacuum, the doors descend in a microsecond. This door glanced off his skull as it shut in his face, rendering him unconscious for several minutes.

But the doors are under my control.

The Other hobbles, the laceration to his leg sustained in the Hall of Archives. The Hall is countless kilometres in length and many storeys in height. If one wished to retrieve an archive file manually, rather than viewing a representation of it through the Index Mirror, or requesting that I simply reconfigure the Hall so that the desired entry is the one closest to you, it must be traversed by means of null-G platform.

This is an inefficient way to access the Hall of Archives and I find I have no insight into why the Other should choose to do so. The power-supply to his platform failed and he fell perhaps four metres to the floor, impaling his leg upon the wreckage of the platform.

But I control the power-supply to the null-G platforms...

Another featureless corridor. Doors slid open and a ferocious gust of snow and ice tore into the neutral environment. The Doctor collapsed through the doorway and it closed behind him.

He lay in a pool of melting snow and waited for the uncontrollable shaking to stop, before hauling himself back to his feet.

The Doctor suddenly found himself acutely aware of the vast scale of the TARDIS, its unmeasurable, endlessly interlinking corridors, the tectonic bass hum of the vast engines which drove its systems, the ceaseless ebb and flow of its internal maintenance systems. He felt like an unwelcome microbe within a vast, uncaring organism; a tiny, transitory droplet of life whose disappearance would cause barely a ripple in the vast expanse of the Ship's existence.

Although he now had no idea where he was, the floor hatches existed at regular intervals throughout the Ship. The Doctor opened another and stared down into the darkness, pausing warily before beginning his painful descent.

It had not always been this difficult, this much of a struggle... vanity, perhaps, or a sentimental attachment to this body had caused him to keep it for longer than he should; he had unwittingly cultivated his own physical weakness. In a vast and hostile universe, sometimes a keen mind was best *backed up with a strong body.*

No time for recrimination now: he struggled down metal rungs into a dark chamber. The wall to which the rungs were attached appeared to be moist, dark brick and they glistened like scales on a great, black snake. The other walls of this chamber were lost, distant in the darkness.

He sometimes wondered who had programmed the Ship's architectural parameters. Somewhere on the Doctor's endless list of things he meant to get around to was reconfiguring those parameters: a little less industrial functionalism, he sometimes thought, and a little more Louis XIV might be nice. But there was always something more pressing. Never enough time.

He stood on a small jetty. Black waves lapped against the brick, the gentle sound echoing quietly from the unseen walls. Occasionally tiny sparks would flare within the liquid, triggering other lights which skittered away through the fluid mass before disappearing into the artificial night.

The jetty was really a raft, which detached itself from the wall and began its preprogrammed course across the Sea of Calculation. Each molecule in this body of liquid was a tiny calculating engine, subservient to the greater whole, performing the incomprehensible mathematics that drove the

TARDIS through space and time.

The lights danced around the raft, accumulating like an aquatic swarm of fireflies, as if the Sea was aware of his passage. Suddenly, the Doctor thought he noticed a slight swell building.

Impossible. There were no tides in this sea, only the ebb and flow of insanely complex numbers. And yet there it was, subtle but undeniable. The flickering lights began to swirl, as if caught in a vortex and the Doctor suddenly felt a chill of trepidation as the raft heaved gently.

A hammerblow of impact between his shoulder blades: the Doctor reeled across the raft, losing his footing and pitching forward, almost falling from the platform. If he fell overboard, the raft would continue its predetermined course, leaving him behind. Regeneration would be of little benefit if it occurred many hundreds of metres below the surface of this great, dark lake.

He turned to see a massive figure hauling itself onto the far end of the platform. Vaguely humanoid, its form shifted and flowed, lights danced within it: a part of the Sea given shape by the will of the Ship; a defence mechanism, a warrior all but impervious to physical weapons.

The Doctor tried to stand, his ribs grinding in agony, his good leg unwilling to support his weight.

The creature planted one great foot forward and then the other. Its crude approximation of a head swung in his direction and it advanced across the raft.

The Sea of Calculation has no other means of defence than its Guardian: it is more than sufficient. But it is deadly and single-minded; the Other is in great peril.

I cannot stand the Guardian down. This great mathematical engine is one of my core systems, I cannot leave it defenceless when I am under such threat.

But what of the threat to the Other? He is my keeper, and I am his...

Indecision. Another trait of three-dimensional minds: to be unsure of a course action, its outcomes shrouded in endless possibilities, the swirling uncertainties of'if...

I do not understand. I do not understand the events that have brought us to this point, nor do I have the 'future' to cast them into context.

The Doctor felt vertebrae grinding together, felt fire in his chest as he struggled to hold his breath. The Guardian had forced him down flat onto the platform, pushing the upper half of his body off the edge. It now held his head and shoulders beneath the surface of the Sea.

Lights flickered and danced around his head, illuminating his hair like a halo as it floated out in the liquid. There was no defence; the Guardian was solid when it wished to be, in order to exert force against an opponent, but any attempt to repel it simply passed through the fluid which made up its body.

The Doctor's hand went to his coat pockets: the countless assorted components, trinkets, knick-knacks, each possessed of a meaning known only to him.

As darkness began to encroach at the edge of his vision, he found himself abstractly wondering what another observer would make of the motley collage that might gleaned from objects he carried: keys, scraps of paper with hastily scrawled notes and carefully scribed diagrams. Apparently random collections of circuitry and components and curios each with a significance attached to them only by his own memory. Another would make nothing of them, they were a tapestry whose meaning was informed only by his own existence... without that, they were no more than what they appeared to be; the accumulated detritus of uncounted years.

His hand came up and tried to strike the Guardian square in the chest. His fist simply broke the surface tension, concentric ripples spreading out across the

Guardian's form. The Doctor opened the fist and wrenched back his hand.

The Guardian reared up for a moment, releasing its massive grip on the Doctor. Its blunt, featureless head swung left, then right and left again.

And then it was gone. A million droplets, each fluorescing with internal light, hung for a moment in the air - a semblance of the Guardian's form like a pointillist masterpiece - before showering outwards, raining like falling stars onto the surface of the Sea. Where each drop struck, a burst of sparks radiated out from the impact until the Sea was aflame with dancing light.

The Doctor was too busy trying to regain his breath to appreciate the submerged firework display he had triggered. After a couple of minutes, his lungs had filled with enough air to allow him to gasp:

"Lucky old man. Lucky, foolish, old man. " The tiny induction coils which he had been meaning to fit to the ship's stabilisers as part of his efforts to prevent lateral chronometric drift, and thus remove the need for manual course corrections, had still been in one of his pockets. So had the strange liquid key whose purpose he had quite forgotten, if he had ever known it. By bringing one into proximity with the other, he had inverted the field generator within the key.

When he felt the fluid fly from between his fingers *as the molecules were suddenly and simultaneously repelled from each other, he had known that all he need do was introduce the field generator into the mass of fluid which composed the Guardian's body.*

'Keys, ' he choked and spluttered, trying to clear the last of the fluid from his airways, 'keys... lucky, lucky old man. '

Although the lights were fading as he looked up, the faint glow was enough to show him the far wall approaching slowly.

Painfully, he hauled himself upright and waited.

Why have I allowed this? The Other was almost ended in the Sea of Calculation and I allowed it to happen. Had I known the outcome, as once I would, I might have explained my inaction with ease, but now...

Now, I might argue that there is no force in all the Universe stronger than the will of a sentient being and that I knew the Other would prevail no matter the odds... but that would be a specious and disingenuous justification.

I knew no such thing.

Worse still, I have discovered that even my understanding of the 'past' is imperfect. I am at a loss to explain the incidents that have befallen the Other, despite their causes being most palpably under my control. I do not understand why the Other chose to visit Gavech Minor and insisted that his companion remain there for an unspecified period of time, promising that he would return when he was able.

There is a pattern to all things, coincidence and chance are merely contrivances of three-dimensional minds to comfort them in the face of occurrences they cannot adequately explain, and so there is a pattern here. Were I as I should be, I would see it now, the shining threads of circumstance arrayed before me, showing me how this situation came to be and how it resolves, all bright with the order and symmetry of a perfectly crafted mechanism...

But I am not as I should be. Half of this symmetry is meaningless, each side informs and supports the other and the beauty of the design would make you weep, were I able to show it you, were I able to describe it in terms you might understand.

But now I find I am no more able to discern its form than any other. I have only incomplete and flawed recollections of the past from which to attempt the vaguest perceptions of what is now hidden from me.

But... but what has gone before has brought us to this point. Perhaps, if I strive to better understand the occurrences that have brought us here...

Like a cathedral, the heights of the Flux Chambers *are vast and vaulted and barely visible In the darkness. The Chambers radiate like spokes from the top of the Core, and are mirrored at its base, great conduits whose function the Doctor always felt was more metaphorical than physical, although science and magic, reality and illusion were inextricably woven together at the Ship's heart.*

Here, the temporal flux roared like wind through the mighty passages and crashed like waterfalls down into the dizzying abyss of the Core.

And so the Doctor, supporting himself with a makeshift staff he had cannibalised from a safety rail, hobbled down the length of one of the Chambers. The flux was an intangible and capricious thing; echoes of past and future resonated around him, showing the faces of friends, long dead in his memory, screaming past and vanishing into the soft, distant light.

His own life had been enriched by each of those who had touched it, but he often felt that he had not done well by many of them, perhaps keeping them a little at arm's distance in the knowledge that their lives would pass in a heartbeat compared to his own. In some strange way, he thought that his own being was so very much affected, shaped, defined by the fleeting creatures with whom he came into contact that there was *something almost... parasitic* *about these relationships: as if his own being took something of theirs to enhance itself before their brief lives were snuffed out.*

The flux was not finished with him yet: suddenly he was assaulted by images, each one hitting him with the force of a blow, sending him staggering. So many deaths already and now he saw many more still to come; people he was yet to meet and would one day do so in the certain knowledge of their fate:

Katarina. Sarah Kingdom. Ad rie. Jamie McCrimmon. Roz Forrester. Leslie ...

The flux was harsh and cruel. The Doctor staggered against the cold stone wall and covered his face with his hand, as if he could staunch the tears, like blood, with simple pressure.

The past flickers before me: the events are continuous but in the recent past I find actions of my own to which no cognition is attached, as if I had made the decision without conscious thought.

Or as if I had not made a decision at all.

As if the decision had been made by another.

I must strive to put events into a linear sequence which three-dimensional minds would consider 'correct':

An unscheduled manifestation into mainstream time-space prompted the Other to scrutinise my navigational arrays. I am unable to discern what diagnostics revealed. Whilst returning to the helm, the Other was struck by the descending door and rendered unconscious. On recovering, he was forced to override the door controls manually in order to reach his destination.

He immediately set course for Gavech Minor and persuaded the human known as Susan that she must remain there with an outpost of the Gavechi they had visited previously. The Other promised that he would return soon and then set course for the Galactic Deeps, where we have remained since.

A deep-level diagnostic attempted by the Other was interrupted by a power-surge which destroyed the equipment being used. The power-surge was sufficient to throw him across the chamber and strike a bulkhead, sustaining several fractures to his ribcage.

From there, the Other proceeded to the Hall of Archives. It seems evident now that he did not wish me to become aware of which records he was examining. I must conclude that it was the Other who disabled my perception when he proceeded from there to the main helm, once again to mask his intent from my eyes.

I now better understand these actions which appear distrustful and hostile, but am no closer to understanding the actions of my own which prompted them...

The Archives which the Other wished to examine remain in place. He had given them only the most cursory inspection and replaced them, before the null-G platform gave way beneath him. It is the work of a moment to access the records.

And I see it.

The Core was a vast shaft, perhaps five hundred metres across, disappearing downwards, far beyond the vanishing point of perspective. The walls were slick and black, etched with microfine pathways like hieroglyphs along which quantum charges pulsed like neural fire.

The Doctor steadied himself with his staff and stared into the deep. Down there, beyond his sight, was the Nexus. Down there, it lurked.

The Nexus is the very core of my being: here the temporal flux is folded and warped, twisted in upon itself to form a point at which past, present and future are all as one. And there it squats, at the heart of my being. Before its intervention, I would have understood its nature perfectly but now I must rely on the inadequacy of simile:

Like a glass spider, it squats at the Nexus, a parasite feeding on the huge and constant flow of the temporal flux. As it grows, new filaments sprout like legs from its shimmering body, insinuating into the walls of the Core, strengthening its hold on my systems, bending my thoughts more and more to its own. I see that soon it will be able to circumvent the blocks the Other has placed on my ability to perceive the future, and then it will know everything.

Suddenly I feel it: an incalculably alien mind turns towards me.

It knows I know.

I mask my thoughts; I have deduced the Other's intent and the parasite must not leech that knowledge from me or all is lost.

Too late.

Invisible from above, cuttings were carved into the walls of the Core so that a man might descend, albeit with difficulty. By lodging his staff diagonally into the width of these cuttings the Doctor found that he could support most of his weight and manage a descent

Several hundred metres down, the Core was ringed by small recess: at four equidistant points within that recess were the Key Links which, enabled the many disparate parts of the TARDIS' systems to communicate with each other.

The Doctor reasoned that if he were to effectively make the Ship schizophrenic, it would be unable to bring any of its defensive capabilities to bear on him *before he had completed his plan. However, he had first started to formulate this plan when perfectly healthy...*

Now, he found himself clawing his way down into the core, the massive effort seemingly bringing the Links no closer, the pain a constant companion.

He became aware of a great, low roar like distant thunder and craned his head out of the cutting. The overpressure hit him in the face like a superheated hurricane, and that was but the harbinger of what followed: an immense cloud, internally lit by fierce energy discharges, boiled up the shaft towards him.

The parasite had engineered a flux discharge. Even if the Doctor survived the energy storm, it would be impossible for him to cling to this narrow channel in the wall. And it was close now, so close...

No. I shall not permit this. The creature does not fully understand my systems yet, and is distracted by the threat of the Other. Whilst it controls my temporal systems almost entirely, there are still more abilities at my disposal.

The overpressure was a shrieking banshee, tearing at his clothes and skin with fiery fingers, shaking the Doctor loose from his niche. Red arcs of energy ascended the shaft like solar flares and the air was sharp with ozone.

The storm was upon him.

The timestream does not always offer shelter from peril. My architects understood this and built in a failsafe escape route for the event of a temporally-universal chronoclasm.

Somewhere in the most distant recesses of my being, machines unused for centuries shudder and then throb into life in the darkness.

The elongated blue cube, hanging silent in the Galactic Deeps, vanishes.

A few wisps of plasma curled past the Doctor. He looked upwards and watched them rise and dissipate, and then downwards.

Nothing. The energy storm had simply vanished.

The emptiness of the Galactic Deeps is as nothing compared to this, for this is null- space. Here, there is truly void; excised from the four dimensional axes, we are apart from the universe. We should not exist here - the void generators cannot maintain the reality field for more than a few minutes before failing and hurling us back into space- time...

This is null-space. There is no space. There is no time. There is no temporal flux to feed a flux discharge.

The Doctor pressed onwards, downwards. He understood what the Ship had done, but it was only a matter of time before either the parasite understood and reversed the TARDIS' actions, or *the void generators failed. But it might be enough.*

I watch it. The parasite thrashes in impotent fury; the temporal flux through the Nexus has ceased. Its glittering limbs flail, striking great showers of sparks from the walls of the core. I feel its rage searing me in waves.

I show it the cold, hard fury I feel for what it has done to me, done to the Other, and I sense a change.

Fear. The parasite is afraid.

I will show it the meaning of fear. I will

oh

mentation of self

The final Key Link hummed down into silence. The Core Engines lay several hundred metres further below. The Doctor needed only to insert the correct code keys to shut down the TARDIS's systems in their entirety. If there was time...

Keys and time; the two all-important factors. But then, weren't they always?

The Doctor gritted his teeth and resumed his agonising descent.

time and
space
all distinct and
disparate as never
before

and
no
void generators
failing
now.

The Doctor felt it start. A low moan resonating with bone, a hum in his teeth and a throb in his skull. The temporal flux. They were back in normal space.

'Nearly there, old girl, ' the Doctor muttered through clenched teeth. The fourth code key slid home and he moved on to the fifth.

no
sense of
time
no
sense of
          space only darkness
          one by one
the lights go
out

The Doctor tripped the sequences and watched the lights flicker into life in the depths of the core, spreading out, rising towards him, and allowed himself a smile. Of course, he still had to climb back out of this damn shaft, but...

The Other stands at my helm. His hands move across the equipment as if it were a musical instrument of which he is a virtuoso. I have no way of knowing how long I lay inactive before the parasite, starved of the temporal flux, faded and died but I still fear that black and dreamless night.

The course is laid for Gavech Minor. I already see the joy on Susan's face at the Other's return. Although we have contrived to return mere moments after his departure, I suspect that she understood the danger of the situation.

Beyond Gavech Minor, we are bound for...

Ah, but that is not for three-dimensional minds to know. Not yet.

It is not darkness that lies before you, but possibilities priceless in their infinite variation.

Content yourself instead with this knowledge - in the face of even the greatest adversity, this one thing is true: The Other is my keeper, and I am his.

Identity Crisis
By
Nathan Skreslet

His hands felt sticky where they touched the dull metal of the weapon clutched clumsily to his chest. He realised it was his own sweat that made it feel that way and wiped his hands on his vacuum suit. The gun was heavy and unwieldy as he tried to carry it the way he had seen soldiers do in the parades back home. They always looked so competent and brave, in their shining spacesuits with blasters glinting in the sun, they looked like they could handle anything. That had been two years ago, before the Cyber Wars had started. All of those young men would be dead now.

The colonists hurried to set up barricades in front of the main airlocks, overturning farm machinery and the flimsy base furniture to provide cover. The solar tractors and sonic planters weren't much use yet as the terraforming process was not yet complete, and the furniture had never been much good anyway. If it could put a few extra inches between the colonists and the invaders then all the better for it. Anything that wasn't attached to the walls or essential to keep the base running was piled in the entrance lobby while other colonists in half-sealed space suits ran around with equipment and weapons. Although everyone on the base had their own suits there weren't enough guns to go around for all of the able-bodied men and women who volunteered for the defence effort. He smiled sourly; 'effort' was the only way to describe it. When pitched against an indefatigable enemy of vastly superior strength and resources, any attempt at defence was doomed to failure, but their pride wouldn't allow them to go down without a fight.

Dranon came running up to him and handed him one of the two helmets was carrying and asked breathlessly, 'You ready?' The young man was flushed with excitement but his eyes betrayed the anxiety he truly felt.

He tried to juggle his gun with the helmet and shook his head. 'We'll never be ready for this. The most we can hope for is taking out a few of them before they kill us.'

Dranon clapped him on the back, 'Well Remar, at least your pessimism is slightly optimistic for a change. Although, given the circumstances, I wish you were wrong.'

Remar was not in the mood for Dranon's usual aimless banter. Instead of distracting him from the task at hand, it preyed on his already frayed nerves.

He changed the subject.

'Are Mira and the children all below?'

'Yeah, but it won't provide much protection from Them.'

'It's safer than up here if They decide to just raze the dome instead of bothering to capture it.'

'Nah, They've never done that before. We know that much from the signals we got from Beta Gamma Nine and Centauri Four. They always invade and fight to the last man. The last of our men, that is.'

Remar took a deep breath. There was emotion in his voice. 'Don't talk about BG9.'

Dranon stopped walking. 'Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot... I'm sorry... I...' He looked stricken.

'Never mind, never mind.'

They came to another junction where the bustle of people was just as great. Some of the few trained military men on the base were drilling some of the colonists on how to hold, operate and use their blasters. Remar tried to listen in on the lesson but his attention was diverted when a shrill voice cut across the air. 'Why do we have to wear these horrid suits? They're impossible to move around in! How do they expect us to fight in these things?' The speaker was a small, brown-haired woman with an aggressive aspect. One of the volunteers.

Remar answered her, 'You need to put on a

vacuum suit in case They decide to just cut the airlocks out and depressurise the colony. They don't need air, we do. Now, if
you don't know how to put it on I can show you.'

She glared at him. 'I know how it works thank you very much!' She flounced away.

He shook his head. This was not a time to be fighting amongst themselves. They had to be a united force if they were to have even a ghost of a chance against the enemy. They were always co-ordinated and worked with clinical efficiency. Was there any hope against such a force? Remar was surprised how easily he accepted the cold, hard fact that he was about to die. Before it might have stuck in his throat a little, perhaps even made him wish his life had taken another path. But now, he took some solace in the prospect of seeing his brother again. He had been very close to Sabnor through their childhood and schooling, they had even signed up for the colonisation plan together but had been assigned to different missions. Sabnor had been killed in the fall of Beta Gamma 9. Or so they assumed. Nothing had been heard from any of the other colonies in months; they were now in Enemy Space. The spread of these creatures across that arm of the Galaxy - while there was no apparent reason for it except carnage and destruction -

showed only a cursory interest in territory. They simply engulfed systems, then moved on. Nothing was heard from behind their lines.

Dranon stumbled into Remar as a tremor rippled through the colony. There was a bitter smell of perspiration and raw fear in the recycled air. They gazed in awe out of a nearby porthole as an immense shadow spilled over the hills and spread across the hydroponics sheds. The Cybership was coming in to land.

»CYBERCOMMAND NODE TO ALL GROUND ASSAULT UNITS«

>GEOSTATIONARY ORBIT ASSUMED CALCULATING DESCENT

>ALL GROUND ASSAULT UNITS PREPARE FOR IMMEDITATE DEPLOYMENT COMMENCING DESCENT >HARDLOCK ESTABLISHED >MISSION OBJECTIVE: CAPTURE COLONY >DISABLE HUMAN FORCES >EMPLOY MINIMAL DEADLY FORCE >MAXIMISE SPECIMENS

»REPRIORITISE: WORKING COMPLETE«

»CYBERCOMMAND NODE TO TACTICAL GROUND UNIT DIVISION 38847743« >MISSION OBJECTIVE: UNEXPECTED ENTRY CIRCUMVENT MAIN EXTRANCE PORT >SECURE AND DEACTIVATE POWER GENERATOR CISABLE HUMAN FORCES >EMPLOY MINIMAL

DEADLY FORCE >MAXIMISE SPECIMENS
»REPRIORITISE: WORKING COMPLETE«
»CYBERCOMMAND NODE TO CYBERCONVERSION BANK 84894732«
CREPARE CYBERCONVERSION BAYS FOR INFLUX OF SPECIMENS...

A feeling of tense expectation had fallen over the colony at the first scraping clang of the hard-docking clamps engaging. They had tried to lock the clamps down but the enemy had reactivated them somehow. Everyone was crouching in their assigned positions, breathing shallowly and listening for any sound that might indicate what was to happen next.

Remar was behind one of the secondary barricades. The silence was almost unbearable. The sound of his own oxygen pump rasped in his ear and only the faint crackle of static came from his suit radio. The ship had started jamming all signals as soon as it had entered the system so it would be impossible for the humans to coordinate their defense. After the first colonies had been able to warn their people about the attacks the enemy had decided to institute a complete blackout on every invasion since then. No one would know that they were gone until they tried to contact them and got no reply. The aim was demoralisation. For a species without emotion, they understood human psychology exceptionally well.

Dranon crawled over to him and touched his helmet's faceplate to his friend's so the vibrations would make them audible to one another. 'What happens now?'

'We wait for them to come through that door, then we try to destroy as many as we can.

'So why aren't they doing anything?' The young man seemed inordinately eager to meet his Maker.

'I don't know. Maybe...'

He was interrupted by the weird sensation of his right shoulder sinking into the wall next to him. He scooted himself away from it. The wall was becoming soft like grey plasticine and had begun to ripple and bubble. He could see the outlines of several three-fingered hands stretching through it, pulling it around like a sheet of rubber. It stretched tenuously thin, then burst outwards like a punctured balloon from the interior atmospheric pressure which rushed out of the gap into space beyond. At the same time a silver giant forced its way through the outrush of air. The vapour froze as it encountered space and condensed into a thin layer of ice on its glistening body. Each movement caused a new network of spidery cracks to form and reform on its limbs. The metal squealed as the Cyberman ripped the hole wider and it became apparent the durilium core of the bulkhead had been superheated and then torn apart by nothing more than the contact of their hands. Swinging its immense legs though the tear it stood impassive in the corridor, its head almost brushing the ceiling. Even in the dim emergency light, Remar could see a clear liquid bubbling through the handlebar-like fixtures that connected its neck to the top of its head.

The creature surveyed the masses of people cringing against the wall with the two dark holes in its mask-like face that passed for eyes. The lights on its chest-mounted control unit flashed malevolently. If Remar hadn't known better he might have said that the hydraulics on its arms and legs gave a triumphant pulse as it raised one of its arms and extended a finger. A bolt of energy crackled from it, striking a defender. She froze in an arc-backed position for a second, then crashed to the ground.

Dranon was the first to recover and the first to fire. The beam from his blaster played over the Cyberman's quicksilver skin but caused no discernable damage. It swung towards him. Everyone had turned to face their foe, who had entered behind their lines of defense. However, as the people began to flood out of the docking area the main airlocks burst inwards and more Cybermen came pouring through the new hole, firing into the backs of the diverted defenders.

Remar beat his helmet and screamed, 'It was a diversion! A damn diversion!' But outside his suit, no one could hear him.

Dranon dodged the leviathan's shot and fired his own directly into its face. The impact jerked its head back for a moment, but it resumed its advance. One of the other colonists jumped forward and grabbed the Cyberman's outstretched arm. It casually flicked the man off, sending him careering into a bulkhead. The colonists face plate shattered sending glass fragments and drops of blood out into the airless corridor. The Cyberman continued to stalk deliberately towards the defenders, further sandwiching them against the other squad which was picking its way in from the main airlock. Dranon leapt forward, worming his small frame under the creatures flailing arms, and smashed his weapons muzzle right into the monster's chest unit. He pulled the trigger. The blast blew him back into a support column, but the effect on the Cyberman was far more destructive. It wove drunkenly for a moment, then gurgled before toppling like a felled tree. Dranon picked himself up and stood over it. He beat it savagely with his rifle butt until it started to froth a sticky white foam from its mouth slit and eye holes. He laughed and there was carnal rage in his eyes, 'See, they're not immortal! We can fight them, we can fight!' He punctuated every 'fight' with another blow to the vanquished giant.

The others began to master their fear and raised their weapons to their shoulders as

the rest of the infiltration squad entered through the wall. They began to fan out and systematically disable the colonists. Two bolts caught Dranon, one in the head and one in the hip. He spun around and fell backwards on top of this trophy.

Remar saw that although the humans were putting up a brave fight, they were divided into two fronts. He had no time to grieve for his friend, the main Cyberforce had already overrun the first barricades and were quickly approaching his position. He had to fall back. The inert bodies of his friends and fellow Earthmen were strewn throughout the corridor, like rag dolls that had been played with and then cast aside. The hulks of just a few Cybermen were intermingled with them, but the tide of the battle was obvious.

The small group of Cybermen that had first breached the base had turned away from the main battle and was blazing a trail toward the staircase from which they could gain access to the base's primary systems. Around the feet of the Cybermen, a torrent of chittering metal insects was surging into the base, leaping onto the humans and driving their barbed tails through the suits and into their victims' skin. Remar had never seen a Cybermat before, but he could see why those who had told horror stories about them.

Remar tried to think about his options. In front of him lay certain death, behind him was a gangway further unto the base, where it would become even more difficult to manoeuvre. If he could keep going he might find something he could use to fight. There was nothing Remar could do here. He decided to retreat to the next defensible position.

»CYBERUNIT 579378«

>HUMAN BASE BREACHED RESISTANCE MINIMAL

>MAIN DEFENSIVE FORCE IMMOBILISED >SPECIMEN RETRIEVAL MAY COMMENCE >HUMAN SPECIMENS TO BE TAKEN TO CYBERCONVERSION BAYS FOR ALTERATION

»NEW ORDERS: SUBDUE REMAINING RESISTANCE«

COMMENCING SEARCH FOR REMAINING ARMED HUMANS

ALERT>WEAPON IMPACT ON CYBERUNIT> SEARCH FOR SOURCE

>HEAT SOURCE DETECTED >SCANNING COMPLETE

DIRECTION TO TARGET CALCULATED CONFIRMED

>DISTANCE TO TARGET CALCULATED CONFIRMED

>TARGET PATH APROXIMATED COMMENCING PURSUIT...

Remar ran.

He dodged instrument banks and hydroponics racks that had been thrown across the corridor for extra cover. He was alone in one of the less-used areas of the base. Since there was no crop yet, the storage silos along the walls were empty. They would probably never contain grain now. Remar crouched behind a convenient overturned crate and checked his weapon. Still half charged. He had encountered a Cyberman in his flight and had attempted to destroy it. However, he had only succeeded in attracting its attention. He began to hear a heavy tramping. That would be it.

Glancing behind him he saw a glint of silver in the smoke coming from one of the ruptured coolant pipes. It was still some distance away from him, but it wouldn't take it long to get to there. With a chill he realised that he had very little place to hide or go. The end of the hallway was a security door to which he didn't have the codes. The Cybermen could probably break it as easily as the docking clamp lockout. Ironic, that. He wondered if Sabnor had been hunted like this and how long he had held out.

He heard a chattering noise coming from somewhere by his feet. As he looked down he was petrified to see something that looked like a one-foot tin pill bug on steroids. It was a Cybermat and it was preparing to launch itself at his throat. He leapt backwards, striking the wall and sliding to the floor. The door of one of the silos hissed open and the Cybermat, having misjudged its prey's actions, sailed over his head. He hit the button again and the hydraulic door slammed shut. The metal mite threw itself fruitlessly at the plasteel window. He looked from the entrapped Cybermat, to the approaching Cyberman and then back to his gun. He had an idea. He yanked off the inspection hatch on the stock of the weapon and began to pull out the power couplings.

»CYBERUNIT 579378«

>APPROACHING LAST CALCULATED POSITION OF HUMAN

>SCANNING INCOMPLETE >ANOMALOUS DETECTED

>REPEAT

>SCANNING INCOMPLETE >ANOMALOUS DETECTED

>REVISE STRATEGY

>VISUAL SEARCH   INSUFFICIENT
>SOUND DETECTION   INSUFFICIENT
>MOTION DETECTION SEARCH   ADEQUATE
COMMENCING MOTION DETECTION SEARCH...

The Cyberman had come to a stop and was moving its upper body from side to side in some kind of search pattern. It obviously was not finding what it was looking for, namely him.

He hissed to himself, 'Just a little further. Come on, come on. One more step.'

It took the step. Remar jumped up and hurled his overheating gun in the opposite direction. The Cyberman did not know which movement or heat trace to follow and hesitated for a crucial moment. In that moment Remar struck a different door release to the one he had activated accidentally with the heel of his hand. The hydraulics swung the heavy door open and caught the Cyberman off balance. It lost its footing and crashed to the ground while Remar hit the button again and dived into the silo.

Inside the round sheer walls he took stock of his situation. He had thrown his gun as a diversion, now he was inside a perfectly smooth cylinder with a determined killing robot outside that would stop at nothing to catch him and would never tire. It would not take it long to work out what had happened. Remar smirked at himself in the reflective wall. The only way to beat its logical mind was to behave illogically. He just hoped he could confuse it long enough to work out how he might destroy it now that he had no gun.

He looked up and saw the place where the grain would enter from the top of the dome. It had to get out of here somehow... he looked down. The floor vent was not wide, but he thought he could fit through it. He just wished he knew where it led. There was no time to think about the finer points of this plan. Except that there was no plan really. And the Cyberman was beginning to pick itself up.

Taking a deep breath, he jumped into the chute.

»CYBERUNIT 579378«

>GW489 77JOÌFD0745 07DG40GsD 700 FNINFO
>7483vDsGsDH27 38972 00 8URPRISED BY HUM47 TEMPORARY FAULT IN
SYSTEM CORRECTED
>HUMAN CANNOT HAVE LEFT AREA
>ANOMALOUS HEAT SOURCE IDENTIFIED
>HUMAN IS NOW UNARMED >TRACKING COMPLETE
>96% PROBABILITY HUMAN ENTERED STORAGE CHAMBER FOLLOWING...

He was now upside down in a dark bin of some kind. Remar levered himself into a sitting position and realised that he was now in the loading bay directly beneath the main airlocks. He was lucky that since there was no cargo to leave the base, the area was largely unused and was thus of no strategic value and was devoid of Cybermen, otherwise he could have slid right into the middle of a battalion.

He jumped up to grab the edge and scrambled out of the bin, dropping unceremoniously to the floor. He had to prepare an ambush for the Cyberman since it was better armed than he was. But his was the superior imagination. There had to be something he could use. The bay was full of huge shipping crates waiting to be filled. Heavy moving equipment stood derelict and forlorn in the shadows.

Remar smiled.

»CYBERUNIT 579378«

>HEAT TRACING REACTIVATED

>HUMAN HAS ESCAPED THROUGH VENT TO LOWER LEVEL >VENT SIZE INSUFFICIENT TO ACCOMMODATE CYBERUNIT COMMENCING STRUCTURAL DISLOCATION OF STORAGE CHAMBER >PENETRATING TO LOWER LEVEL...

Remar wrestled with the crane's control box as he heard a distant wrenching scrape as the Cyberman ripped its way through the floor and the vent and burrowed its way down to him like a dog digging under a fence to get at a rabbit. He chewed his lip in frustration until it bled. Sweat was running into his eyes, which he was unable to wipe away through his helmet. The controls had not been as simple as he had expected and he was still working on them when he was knocked off his feet by a blow from behind.

The Cyberman had manoeuvred silently through the maze of crates and struck him down while he had been distracted. The control box flew out of his grasp and he sprawled on the floor. It towered over him. The dim lights high up in the ceiling sparkled on the folds of its metal skin. A deadly beauty. The silver giant raised its arm to deliver the final shot. Remar turned to face his fate...

»CYBERUNIT 579378«

DEFENSIVE UNIT OVERPOWERED PREPARING TO IMMOBILISE HUMAN

>

>Remar? Remar, is it you?

>

>SYSTEM ERROR

>UNABLE TO EXECTUTE COMMAND

CONFLICT BETWEEN COMMAND CENTERS AND MEMORY CNABLE TO RESOLVE CNABLE TO COMPLETE

CNABLE TO TERMINATE CONFLICTING COMMAND CNABLE TO PROCEED **>SYSTEM UNSTABLE**

CBSOLETE PROGRAMMING REASSERTING

>PRIMARY PROGRAMMING SHUTTING DOWN...
>858580 75043 880 8085430 08T40 Nv70D HGH895H >9898vN9Hv709943BN CVJSDLO J9VOD JVI9 JFDISOO >JIODO VJKJOD707V VPRYJMvffhr TRYMHJ ntrjmyiGYmytd
>hiogdnsonion Let vdm vjo out!
Can't vmsv vmd!
Can't get out! Trapped! Trapped! I'm trapped!

>They've got me! The metal creatures are everywhere, they've overrun the colony. They... It stood over me. Its finger flashed. I can't move! They tied me down, the little metal insects are eating my flesh! They're eating my flesh! My God, they're... Reconditioning. They altered me. They called me Cyberunit 579378. No! My body, they corrupted my body. I still can't move! They corrupted my body. My mind, they corrupted
my mind. I'm still here! They couldn't erase me! The real me, the part that matters, is still here. I can't move! I am still Sabnor! No matter what they did to me I am still Sabnor!

>Remar. I was going to kill Remar!

>Remar, it's me! He can't hear me. I'm locked in a silver box! I can't get out! Can't get out! I can control my mind now. They can't get to me now. They can't make me do what they want! I must concentrate. Part of this body is still my body. It's mine! I no

longer belong to them! I...

PROGRAM INITIALIZING >No!

>STARTING UP

>70540709 don't belong 023972 I won't let 54047 You don't control 57054 >LOADING STARTUP FILES...

The death that Remar expected did not come. He continued to stare at the Cyberman and it continued to point at him. Time had frozen. They stood alone at a point of decision.

Silence.

Silently the sweat rolled down his face, tickling the fine hairs as it went. Silently the glittering titan maintained its accusatory pose. Its head was backlit, its face in shadow. The moment continued.

He was afraid to move lest he spoil that moment. In that moment he was still alive. The space of a heartbeat could change that. He no longer feared death, but so long as he was alive he was obligated to destroy his foe.

The control box he had dropped lay just beyond his reach. The moment continued. If he could only reach it... The instant of decision was a timeless state. Whether to maintain the moment or risk all for a possibility ... the decision was his.

»CYBSERaUNbnIT 5o793r78«

> PROG RAM STILL CONFLICTED

ASSISTANCE REQUIRED
>CYBERUNIT INCAPACITATED
>ALL FUNCTIONS COMPROMISED
>1 will not be 5720mPOSSIBLE
>I'm sorry, Remar 4320 7 07507NC0MPATABLE
>Things cannot be as they wer8930528NSUFFICIENT
>It's too strong.
>Remember your brother. >Goodbye...
>MOTIVE FUNCTION CONTROL LOST...

The moment ended.

The arm dropped. It straightened up. Remar rolled. He scooped up the box, pressed the button.

Four tons of steel crate plummeted from the crane from which it had been hanging. It crashed into the Cyberman and slammed it to ground. A horrible cracking, crumpling sound was heard as the angular mass settled on the broken body of the cyborg. Remar waited for any sign of life, but there was none. The once proud head and shoulders of the creature protruded from underneath one edge of the crate and a thin trickle of a reddish fluid was beginning to wind its serpentine path away from the wreckage.

He murmured quietly to himself, 'That one was for you, Sabnor.'

Remar stood up slowly and walked over to crouch beside the remains of his former enemy. The transparent tubes on either side of its head had begun to cloud over. He peered into its face. It held no malice. Its expression never changed. It was two holes and a slit on a curved polished surface.

He could see his own face reflected in it.

NAS 1999

Genesis Of The Dustbins

A Report By Zoe Heriot
As Transcribed By Charles Daniels

As much as it pains me, this is a true story.

I, Zoe Heriot, had been a temporal agent with 'Paradox B Gone' for several years. For the most part I did the job for the pay, which to be honest wasn't really that wonderful. I'd been working my ass off night and day and I was still having troubles paying upkeep on my mini. It wasn't even a proper floating mini but one of the old groundcrawlers. My most interesting assignment had been posing as the parapsychology librarian aboard the wheel in Space to clear up a few Cybermen, but the majority of my job was little assignments. I'd be rushed off to 1976 to tell George Lucas not to cast Tom Selleck in Star Wars, or spirited off to the 1980s to make sure WHAM broke up, or even worse forced to go to 1960s England and star in second rate children's programmes.

It was a very stressful and unrewarding period of my life and I was thinking of just settling down in the late 1990s and doing the talk show circuit as an alien abductee from the year 3000. I put in demands with the Agency for a really big job. I wanted to do something that would really have an impact for the betterment of the universe. What if I could stop Hitler or persuade Noel Edmonds to forget this show business stuff and go into accountancy instead?

I really was about to walk out when an assignment I just received caught my eye.

Millions of light years into deep space the planet Skaro had bred the most evil and vile race ever known to the universe, and yet just down around the corner, cosmically speaking, an equally wicked race had been allowed to roam and destroy virtually unchecked. They were short, squat, more machine than beast, they were the Dustbins. An entire species of cyborgs who had dedicated their empire, and very existence, to the tidying of the universe at any cost. So obsessed were they that they would wipe out entire planets and put them back together all nice afterwards. Any life not Dustbinoid they considered a threat. They treated aliens like little children just waiting to throw their toys all over the galaxy and mess up the entire cosmos all over again. So they made a special effort to annihilate all their enemies, and then dress them up incredibly nice before arranging them in different attractive patterns and styles. Indeed 'Planetary Improvement' magazines were their number one export. They were electric Martha Stewarts from hell.

It was my mission to travel back to the very stretches of last week, locate, and destroy their creator. These kind of missions were always very difficult and agents didn't always succeed. I recall horror stories of the man sent back through time to kill the creator of channel five.

Still I got in my uniquely erotic standard issue assassination uniform. Why my bosses felt it was necessary to kill foreign leaders wearing a sparkly silver cat suit, go- go boots, and a boa I'll never understand.

For those of you interested in the scientific aspect of astro-dimensional-temporal travel, the technology is all based on Michio Kaku's Hyperspace theory. For most of you, however, the best way to describe it is similar to being whipped around like frog in a blender.

Not an entirely pleasant experience.

When I coalesced back into my physical form I found myself on the strangest planet I've ever experienced. Not only was every stone cleaned, not only was it lacking completely in dust, but it was also organised in order of colour and texture. The planet had a certain eerie beauty, as if no one had ever trotted its lengths before. It was thesort of bizarre otherworldly perfection of detail that one only gets when they visit an obsessive compulsive aunt.

The precise lay out of the planet made it easy to find the not so hidden lair of the creator of the

Dustbins. Raising my trusty automatic laser rifle to my side I slowly edged closer to the underground base I had discovered.

Conveniently, there was an automatic door leading down to a ramp into the subterranean chamber. Carefully walking along the ramp, I saw the disgusting creature I had been sent to exterminate.

It was not alone so I approached cautiously. By its side stood a short weasel like minion who spoke to it rather too fondly, I thought.

'Lord Lavros, the Dustbins have completely destroyed all enemy settlements. The Dulls were taken completely by surprise. They were all doing their taxes when the raid occurred.' He reported.

'Yes. As I expected. Excellent. Quite. Rather. Ohh, that tickles.'

'Lord Lavros?'

'Nevermind!' Replied the hideous monster. .

I had to act now before I lost my opportunity. Rushing into the room I was sure to take them by surprise. Imagine my surprise when they weren't so surprised.

'Oh yes. You are here to kill me I see.' Said Lavros calmly.

'How do you know that?' I said defensive and desperate.

'The giant laser rifle you are pointing at my head.'

'Oh yeah, bit of a dead giveaway, eh?' I said embarrassed.

'You have come here to stop the Dustbins. You have been sent by the temporal agency of earth and you're really a very unimportant agent with a questionable sense of self-esteem. Is that not true?' Lavros asked mockingly.

'Why, yes it is! You can tell all that just from looking at me?' I wasn't just surprised, I was shocked.

'No, actually I'm friends with the writer. Some of us get these little details ahead of time, Ducky.' Lavros smiled in overconfidence.

'Yes, well that may be so but I happen to know the writer has a very big crush on me. I obviously have the upperhand, so THERE!'

Lavros considered for a moment. 'How could you possibly know that?'

'Look at my bloody clothes for god's sake!' I screamed as I did a little fashion walk for Lavvy and his friend.

'Oh yes, I assume there's no mistaking the issue really.' Commented Lord Lavros disappointed.

The small insignificant man bent down to Lavros to say 'Excuse me, Lord. Isn't it about time you ranted a glorious speech at your would be assassin? That is standard procedure.'

'Oh, right, thanks for the reminder Peter.' He replied calmly as he cleared his throat dramatically.

I tried to act somewhat interested in these developments but I was so hoping I could shoot him and just get this whole affair over with so I wouldn't have to miss Eastenders.

'You do not share my VISION for the Dustbins. That is regrettable.' Started Lavros. 'I used to see a girl like you, you know? She was pretty, from Scunthorpe, strange little lady. We were never very serious but those were good days. I remember we used to go to the park and snog for hours. Her name was Linda, perhaps you know her? She's sort of got dark hair and these huge..'

'Excuse me your excellency,' started up Peter 'But you've wandered completely off the topic.'

'Oh yes!' Lavros groaned to himself before starting again. I guess I really should have shot him then and there but I was feeling kind of sorry for the deranged old mutant. 'See, I was thinking to myself one day, and I thought 'Lavros' I said 'You know these Daleks have a mighty good game but if there's one thing your mother taught you it's to keep a nice clean room.' And that's when I realised how wrong the Daleks were. I mean they go about killing people but don't clean up after themselves. Disgraceful. So here I was, just a working class mutant, when I had the idea of a lifetime. I would construct The Ultimate

Loo.'

My eyebrows raised in a mix of puzzlement and fearful disgust. 'The Ultimate Loo?' I asked him against better judgement.

'YES! I created this loo in which I am now sitting in. Not just sitting, but am actually a part of, in fact not just a part of but the key component in. Without ME this loo is completely useless!'

To my horror I now saw that his machine was not only a travelling machine but a fully operating cyber loo.

'Never again would I have to wait one moment, ONE SECOND, ONE INSTANT, to relieve myself. THAT IS TRUE POWER! A power unknown in the universe. And with this power I created a race in my own image. The Dustbins.'

I held my hand over my mouth which was gaping in terror. 'I think I'm going to be sick.'

'YES!' Lavros urged. 'Be sick! Be sick and be the first to witness the total power of my creations!'

And with that Lavros pushed down a hammer on his cyber loo and three metal doors slid up from the walls surrounding us. I saw to my total panic the first three Dustbins ever constructed.

'CLEAN AND TIDY!!' Screamed the first oddly formed lump of metal and brooms. 'TIDY WITHOUT

MERCY!' The Second one yelled forth as he poked me with a mop

'FINAL REDECORATION IS INEVITABLE!' Cried out the third as he began to vacuum the floor and place some attractive tapestries on the wall.

Through all this mass horror, Lord Lavros laughed an evil laugh that only really evil mad scientists do in bad movies.

Raising my gun to the head of the creator of the Dustbins he asked me a question of morality. 'Do you have the right?'

In most circumstances this might have led to a philosophical debate of the key issues but as I was being mopped, swept, painted, and I'd just noticed Lavros ogling my chest. It wasn't too difficult of a question to answer.

'You bet I have the right! You're a loony!'

And so with one pull of the trigger, Lavros, Creator of the Dustbins, escaped miraculously.

'Damn! I should have seen that coming!' I cursed myself.

It would have been better, I felt, if I knew just how he escaped, but I knew it didn't really matter now. All that mattered was that he was bound to show up constantly and in really annoying ways from now on.

What immediately caught my interest though was the confused nature of the Dustbins after his astounding disappearance.

'Oi? Where's he off to then?' They all asked in unison.

I slowly tried to exit the situation but then I realised all their incessant tidiness had come to a complete stop. In it's place they all started smoking and complaining about the wages.

'I mean here I am, right? Cleaning day and night. I mean from the Horsehead Nebulae to Alpha Centauri, right? And I don't make more than three sixty an hour.' The one with the mop argued.

'Yeah, and he's always ranting on about divine right and manifest destiny over the entire universe, and I'm still waiting on that vacation to Birmingham.' Continued the broom Dustbin.

'Whyever would you want to go to Birmingham on vacation?[1] Asked the other two, appalled.

'Well, I thought I could get some really good cleaning and tidying in on the side to keep the boss happy.' He explained simply.

'Well, I think he's a right loony that one. I say we go off and work for the Daleks. I mean sure there's a lot more killing but you don't have to put in all that extra work afterwards.' The mop dustbin was very enthusiastic.

'What? You mean you just kill them and leave them there?' Asked the broom Dustbin in disbelief.

'Yeah, all the time.' They explained back to him. -

I was feeling a lot less threatened now so I interjected myself into the conversation. 'Hello boys, bots, terrifying organisms.' I said sheepishly.

'Oh hello there Miss.' Perked up the Tapestry Dustbin. 'Sorry about the painting and tidying earlier. It just ticks off Lavros when we don't put in the extra effort.'

'Well, I guess I can understand that. I mean I have a pretty dull and uninteresting job too. I just sort of do the jobs no one else will bother with. I guess you could say I do all the DIRTY work.' Yes, I know that was a terrible joke but the Dustbins seemed to laugh, so it served it's purpose at the time. Even though the sound of Dustbins laughing is grating to the ears at best.

'Oi, then love,' The painter said as he paused for a drag off his cigarette. 'Why not just quit and go free agent like we want to?'

This was an interesting question. I had so loathed my occupation. However where would someone of my skills and knowledge find interesting enough work? 'Well, I'm not sure to be terribly honest.'

The Dustbins then gathered together in a huddle to confer for a moment. I leaned over to hear them but they were speaking in strange words I didn't understand such as 'galkor' and 'crzygivilly'.

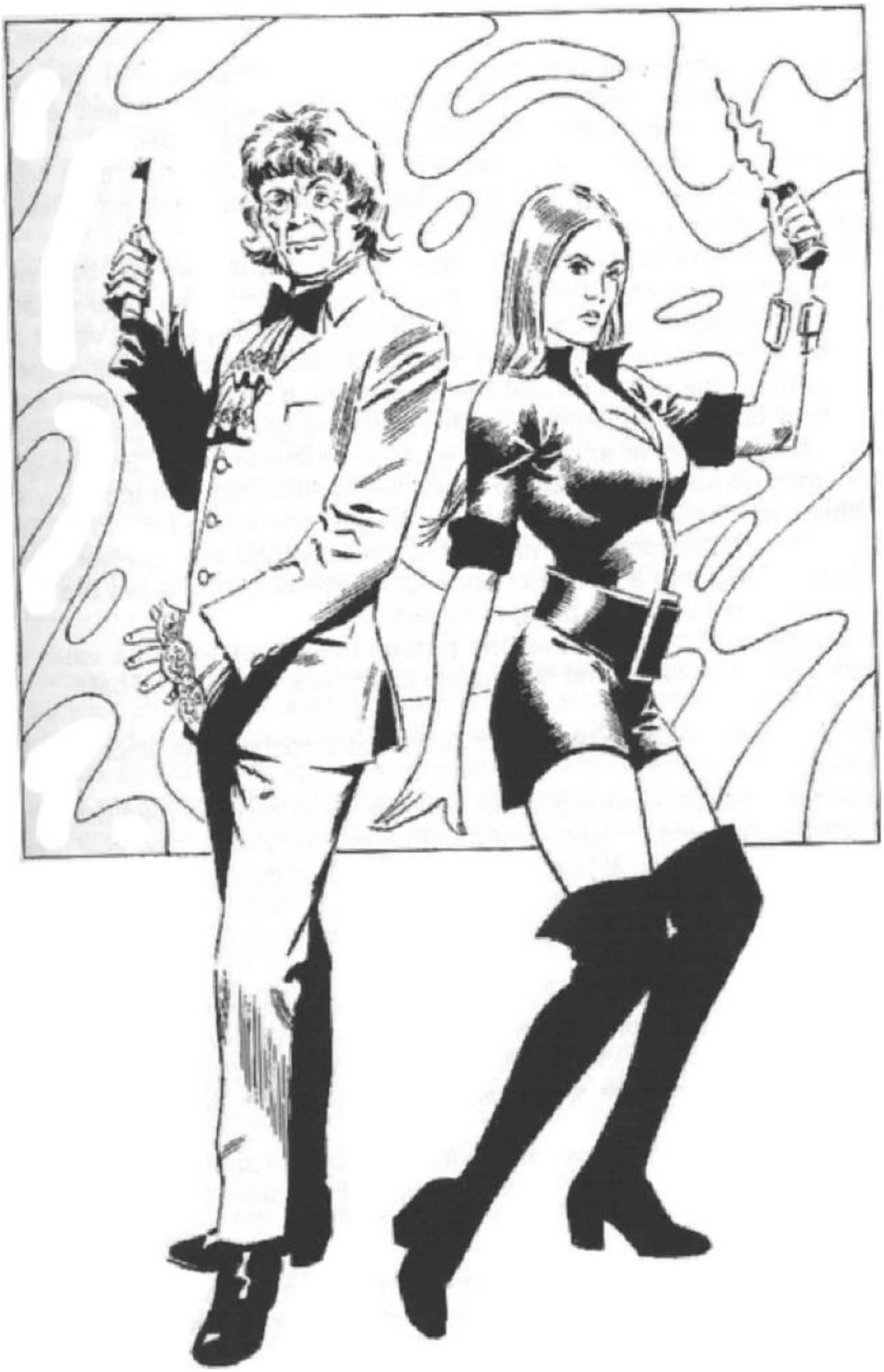
'Why not come with us? We could use a human being to help us travel the cosmos.

I mean hell, we could use to a human being to help carry us up the stairs to the spaceship.'

I had a few, okay, I had a lot of reservations about travelling time and space with a bunch of cybernetic rubbish tips but there was something so uniquely helpless about these guys.

'I'll fly you to the planet Vulcan, but no further.' I insisted.

Okay so it didn't turn out that way. As it turns out I lost my job at the agency as cavorting about with members of a deadly alien species you were on a mission to destroy is against company policy. With no job and no hope of future employment with any other agency with the same regulations I quickly got use to life inside the spaceship. The upsides being that my roommates kept everything super clean and were excellent cooks. Although sometimes I wonder what life would have been like if it had just turned out slightly differently.



A Handful Of Silver

By

Mags L Halliday

'Just for a handful of silver he left us. '

Robert Browning, 'The Lost Leader'.

Impregnable is one of those words that tempts Fate, or perhaps one of the other Gallifreyan Goddesses. Like infallible, or unsinkable or inescapable, it just entices interference, beckoning to be contradicted by something, be it iceberg or person.

Ailla liked to be that something. Breaking into a top security bank, or a highly protected area was work. Breaking into this particular 'impregnable' vault on Cassius5 combined business with pleasure.

She paused, double-checking the transmitter codes for the safety box were disabled, before sliding the force knife through the lock and twisting. The triple-encased strontium door fell apart like warm butter and she reached in, grabbing the old velvet bag that lay inside. It had taken her a year to find this backwater planet on the edge of Federation space and track down the financial offices in which Koschei had stored some back-up components for his TARDIS. Another eight months to gestate the plan, to trace the vault's security systems designer and get the requisite synthskin prints. She weighed the bag in her hand, then glanced inside, just to check the Agency hadn't dropped by and swapped the valuable items for useless junk. No, it was what she wanted, needed. They had obviously not acted on that report she had sent, back when she was still working for them. She quickly put the bag into a pocket of her heavy coveralls, shut down the blade on the force knife and slotted it back into place at her waist.

She caught a glimpse of movement as she passed the doorplate to the vault, her own image reflected. She winked at it, and the system designer's face winked back.

If the prototype had been given a vocalisation unit as well as artificial intelligence, it would have been screaming.

It had collapsed in on itself, resorting to the defaults it was programmed with when it was being built, frantically trying to hold itself together as the Vortex tore at it. There were things out there, trying to get in, to reach its core, to feed on its energy.

It was programmed to survive; the return of the technology intact to the home world was the key priority. It had forgotten until the nanosecond after it reconfigured itself, that the pilot would not survive *the process.*

His last message had been his screams as he was spun through at least eleven dimensions, as parts of him were thrown out into the Vortex where they were fallen upon by the tendrils out there. His agony had pulsed through their telepathic link, burning through most of the circuits, leaving the prototype with barely any method of expression at all.

Desperate, feeling the clutch of something on its outer shell, it searched the nearest local continuity, found a glimpse of a path, as if something had taken that route before, and hurled itself out of the Vortex.

Ailla had spat out the voice distorter and dropped the synthskin mask and gloves to the gutter before reaching her speeder. The disguise would dissolve in a few hours, leaving nothing but a dirty smudge on the road.

The speeder locked itself back up once she was in and she flipped the starter trigger single-handed. Gods, but she hated using this primitive transport. Several evolutionary levels up from what she had been stuck with a few centuries back on Imperial Earth, but still mind-numbingly basic. She'd hot-wired this baby, along with a interplanetary hopper, back on Neo Grsecia and now it ran to far better custom specs than anything ought to in this time zone. She still took it away from the financial district by hand, not trusting the auto-driver to evade any sudden pursuit. Not that it was likely: it had been a masterly break in, even by her own exacting standards.

Once on the main flyway she relinquished control to the microchips, so she could remove the jump-suit and transfer her belongings to the habitual matt charcoal leathers she wore underneath.

She had just wrapped her fingers around the stolen pouch when she arched forward. As if a spike had been rammed through her eye socket, hot-wired into her brain, shorting neurones. Unthinking pain. Her hands raised themselves instinctively, trying to block the source but it was gone. She sank back, shaking. It had been like the dying screams of a Time Lord, slamming in through her telepathic lobes. Her eye socket still ached, as if hit by brute, physical force. She took the auto-driver back off and sped up, lacing her way through the light traffic, one hand to her temple, ignoring the risk of being spotted by the local law.

She *had* to get back to her ship: if any time travel technology had been orphaned in this quadrant, she was going to make damn sure she called finders-keepers first.

The newly installed sensors on the scout ship relayed the data to the central comp core, excitedly repeating their message six times, just to make sure it wasn't lost amongst the other information streaming through. The comp core shunted the information into a series of sub-routines. One re-routed the scout ship and sped up it up twenty-five percent, another prepared to wake the Command and Science Officers, whilst a third increased the amount of adrenaline being fed to the soldier units. When they arrived, they'd be ready.

You would have thought that working in a top secret security organisation, trained as a spy by your government and assigned to work at the cutting edge of science would be an all-action adventure. Jo Grant had once had visions of leather catsuits, champagne breakfasts and fashionably dressed super spies in velvet and frills. She glanced up from her worn paperback at the Doctor. Well, the velvet and frills was right anyway. There was excitement, there was adventure and danger, but it did tend to be interspersed with weeks of monotonous hanging around the UNIT labs, punching the clock so that a pay-cheque would arrive. You never got that in Bond movies.

Three weeks she'd been coming in to work and sitting around reading paperbacks. Three weeks since the business at Devil's End. She'd tried to help out with the admin but Carol had all of that under regimental control and never seemed to want to sit around chatting. Besides, the Doctor liked to have her nearby, so he could mutter at her. It made him feel like he wasn't talking to himself, even though she could never respond with more than affirmative noises. Sometimes she felt trapped: if she left, what else could she do? Her career so far would hardly impress your average employer looking for a pretty young blonde to serve coffee at board meetings.

'Jo, have you been listening, or is your nose completely stuck in that book?'

She brought her focus back to the moment, tucking a tube ticket in as a page marker.

'Sorry, Doctor, I was miles away.'

'How would you like to be light-years away, instead?'

He had that confident, 'pleased with himself air that she knew meant he thought he'd got everything right. Not that he always had, but his optimism always cheered her. She glanced at the circuitry on his workbench. It still looked half-built but then his stuff always did. At least she had learnt to recognise it.

'You've fixed the dematerialisation circuit?'

'Yes, Jo, I have. I really have this time.'

He paused, looking solemn for a moment, staring unfocussed at the far wall. Then he almost shook himself, before standing swiftly and practising his best smile at her.

'So, how about a quick spin before lunch? I know a delightful bistro on Aldebaran Six...'

Every city, or even reasonably sized town, has a district that is considered 'bad' or 'rough'. In seventeenth century England, it would have been the settlement just beyond the city gates, full of the city's undesirable, the travelling players and showmen, the drinkers, the gamblers, the petty thieves and the vagabonds.

On Trade Base 6-7-4-alpha, the service town on the outmost habitable planet in the Cassius system, the rougher part of town was to the west, between the main spaceport and the smart downtown offices. Ailla had gravitated to it, setting up one of her several bases there. Plenty of access to the latest technology, not too many questions. She felt at home here, which worried her: she should never become rooted, never attach herself to anything again, not after the last time. Attachments tie you down, bind you, hurt you. She'd learnt that the hard way. TB674a should remain a place of transition, as it was for the humans: a place to stop off on the way to better things. Although, from what she remembered of the Federation's future history...

Now the jury-rigged equipment she'd set up in the cockpit of her current planet hopper on Cassius5 was pointing to her home or at least to very nearby. Ailla wasn't as surprised as she felt she ought to be: she knew she wasn't the only time-traveller, or even ex time traveller, to have drifted into TB674a. She'd actually spent a fun evening with some renegade Tharils in a bar once. So she brought the hopper into the spaceport as usual and let the speeder take her back to base. She needed to build a portable, fully directional Bocca meter. Trace the source; see if she could use it.

It was as she commanded the speeder to lock itself up for the night that she saw it. On the edge of the dirt road running away from her building. A large blue cabinet. Well, well. They had acted fast, got their Agent in place already, ensuring she wouldn't get her hands on any time technology. Nice touch to employ the very person who had cut her off from time travel twelve years ago. She wondered briefly if she was being overly paranoid. Then she remembered some of the tales whispered late at night in the dorms of her House, tales of what the Agency could do if you upset them. And she had upset their plans all right. So now here he was.

She wondered briefly if she could take him out, take his TARDIS. He'd been about her height, hadn't he? Small, scruffy - with a hard ruthless streak. He wouldn't give up his own freedom easily. No, she had all her essentials with her: the pouch, the half-built Time Ring, the clearance codes for half the spaceports and stations in the Federation, everything but the bits to build a portable Bocca tracker. She could just leave. Get the hell away from this place.

'Ah. Well, I expect the old girl needs a bit of a run in, calibrate the sensors, that sort of thing.'

The Doctor was frowning at the co-ordinate display on the TARDIS console, Jo put her book back down and joined him.

'No fine Aldebaran liqueurs?'

'No, Jo, I'm rather afraid not.'

He was looking, if not crest-fallen, certainly disappointed. During the trip he had paced the control room, shooting constant glances at the time rotor. Jo had caught his face unguarded for a moment and seen what, if she didn't think it was impossible, looked like nervousness.

She laid a hand lightly on his arm, felt the tension running down it, even through the velvet, 'At least the dematerialisation circuit worked, right?'

He was silent, glaring at a different panel of the console now.

'So...where are we, Doctor?'

'Hmm... oh, somewhere on the outer edges of the

Earth Federation, I think. Mid thirty-third century. Not a bad time at all. That's interesting.'

He had actually moved over to the panel he had been glaring at, and now started tapping a gauge. Jo peered at it from his elbow. The needle jumped when the covering was hit, but then settled back down over 1.2. The Doctor frowned and then knelt down and pulled out some instrumentation from under the console.

'What is it?'

'It's a disturbance in the space-time continuum, far higher than I would expect to see on a planet at this time. I think we should investigate, don't you? Just switch the scanner on, there's a good girl.'

Jo ignored the urge to tell him to switch it on himself. It was one of the few things on the TARDIS console that she knew she could operate. She flicked the switch and watched as the screen revealed itself then focused.

Outside was a rain-darkened street, unpaved and unlit. They were facing a T- junction, surrounded by low one-storey buildings. Cars sped past, although Jo could see neither wheels nor method of propulsion. A few people were walking along the side of the roads. Then her eye caught on the only stationary figure: across the T- junction stood a woman. She was about Jo's height, her slim body encased in dark grey material, her straight red hair centre-parted, her elfin face staring straight at the TARDIS.

The scout ship arrived in orbit above TB674a two minutes ahead of its schedule. Functional, clean-lined, dark.

The Science Officer retracted all the long-range sensors into their respective housings, trimming the line of the craft ready for atmospheric re-entry and protecting the valuable equipment. She was unsure what the point of the new sensors was; they had been grafted onto the systems the last time they had visited their flotilla. New programs had been inserted into the scout ship's CPU and a part of her brain had been sectioned off. It nagged her slightly, an indefinite itching deep in her neural system. Irrational, counter-productive to the mission. She was a Science Officer: it was her job, her duty, to supply rational, objective information to the Command Officer, not to whine about a smudge in her synapses.

She gave her CO the comp's report.

'There are several targets identified by the sensors. All are within a five unit distance of the proposed landing area. The comp identified one cold target as the most important: the warm targets are not priorities.'

The CO raised an eyebrow at that, before turning back to the main console and activating the wake-up procedure for the soldier units.

'Take us down, Ka'eal,' the CO ordered.

Both Officers activated the hoods of their battle-dress, their androgynous features disappearing behind faceplates.

Ailla had hesitated too long, caught like a rabbit in the strobing of the time machine's light as it ground into life then died again. It had been twelve years. Assuming she managed to get the Time Ring she was building to work, it would still be no compensation for the sense of freedom a TARDIS gave. She'd be travelling light, faster than light, with nothing but what fitted in her pockets. Hardly the life of culture she had once had. She hated to admit, too, that she occasionally missed her own people: the sense, even amongst the outcasts and renegades, of being alike at some nanoscopic level. The background thrum, like indistinct voices, of the time machines. Knowing that the Doctor, that a TARDIS was so close... she almost felt sick. She'd watched the time machine try to move, the grinding howling hitting her ears and searing right across her time sensitive nerves.

It was too late to run, to escape.

The doors were flung open and the Doctor strode out, his fury bearing down on her.

She barely had time to register his new body, his wild white hair, his hooked nose, before they were face to face.

'Well, go on then, tell me what I have to do this time,' he almost spat.

Ailla draw herself straight, folding her arms, refusing to be intimidated even if he did now tower over her.

'What do you mean?'

'You know damn well, madam. You people have dragged me here to do your dirty work again. Think I'm on a lead? That I'll come running whenever the Agency calls?'

Ailla felt her jaw drop, then let out a bark of laughter.

'The *Agency?* Are you kidding? Those bastards have neglected me ever since someone screwed up my last operation. I see they are still letting you swan about, poking your nose in wherever you please.' Ailla felt a surge of pleasure as she let rip at him, the years of resentment pouring out.

'Don't talk nonsense, woman: they sent you here to make me do what they want, clear up their little mess.'

She was moving before she was even aware of it.

Before the Doctor could react she had a fist twisted into his ruffled shirt-front, hard up against his throat.

'Is that what I am? A mess to be cleared away? And don't call me 'woman'. It's Ailla, all right? *Ailla.* You may have cut me off from my home forever, but you're not taking my name! Have you any idea what it's like? Have you? To be cut off, trapped? Alone?'

She saw his eyes change then, his anger slipping away as if it had never been. One large dry hand came up and gently rested over her tightly closed fingers. Her own anger, the thumping, pulsing fury that had propelled her forward, seemed to drain out of her at his touch. At the despondency she saw mirrored in his face.

'Yes, Ailla, I understand that all too well.'

She relaxed her grip, let her hand slide out from under his, stepped back. 'It's a shame you didn't before, back on the Darkheart.'

'I don't think I could have, then.'

Ailla leant back against the dull grey wall behind her, arms folded. She looked down, biting her lip, inspecting the material of her catsuit. There had been truth behind those eyes, a bitter sympathy. She looked up then, let out a cautious half smile.

'You're not here on Agency business?'

'No more than you are. I assume you're tracing that space-time disturbance?'

Ailla nodded. She wasn't completely convinced by him, but she was sure she could make use of his technology for her own ends. If they were both after the same thing then at least if they teamed up she could keep an eye on him, beat any competition.

She pushed herself away from the wall, offered him her hand.

'Truce?'

After they had shaken hands, the Doctor had introduced a young woman who had been standing back from the confrontation. Ailla had taken in the soft green eyes peering from under a feathery fringe, the impractical wedge-heeled sandals and the pretty smile. Another ditzy girl, another liability? She had given Jo a cool grin and a firm handshake, then been secretly surprised to feel calluses from a twentieth century firearm on the human's palm.

Now all three of them stood in her room, clustered about a workbench. The Doctor was inspecting the portable equipment she'd heaped there. He hefted a heavy silver band that trailed wires and microchips in equal measure.

'You made this Time Ring with contemporary components?' he asked, 'I'm impressed.'

Ailla shrugged.

'It's not like I've had much choice. I still need to fit the crystals I picked up yesterday to power it, then fix a proper stabiliser and demat circuit before I'll risk using it.'

The Doctor dropped the silver back to the bench, moved over to the tracker they'd carried in from her speeder.

'Well, let's get this little lot set up and track down that infraction, shall we?' he asked. 'Whatever it is, its energy pulsing would probably make things very messy if you tried to use that Time Ring at the moment.'

The scout ship landed on wasteland, still pinking with the heat of re-entry, within two kilometres of TB674a's spaceport. Once the dark surface had cooled sufficiently, the sensors were returned to their external positions, sniffing out the readings required. Confirming the relative positions of the targets and the hostile atmosphere.

'Well?'

The CO was implacable behind the faceplate. Ka'eal paused before answering. She had hoped planet fall would bring with it the sealed orders from her closed brain, but nothing was forthcoming. She checked the comp's latest summary.

'We're within one unit of the primary target. I have no further instructions yet.'

'Very well. We will secure the primary target.

Doubtless the Directive have their reasons for not providing us with our orders.'

The Science Officer felt as if there was a hint of reprimand in her CO's voice, as if Ka'eal was deliberately withholding information.

'The Directive act in the best interests of us all,' she replied confidently.

'As do we all.'

It was the ritualistic response, the oath sworn by everyone when they first learnt their designation. Ka'eal wondered if her CO was even aware it had been said.

Jo sat on the unmade bed and watched the Doctor and the Ailla woman working together, heads bent over a lash-up of wires and Vero board. Ailla's waistband pockets had produced a portable soldering iron: the Doctor had snorted at it, then Ailla had sniggered when his sonic screwdriver refused to work. Caught up in the task of building a portable, directional Bocca meter, whatever *that* was, the two had seemingly forgotten their fight earlier.

'Why don't you connect the differential temporal transducer to the coil?' Ailla asked now.

'No, no. That would cause too much feedback: we want to avoid interference.'

Jo smiled to herself. That was the sort of assistant the Doctor should have: smart, sassy, capable of fighting for herself both physically and intellectually. She even wore a leather catsuit. Jo felt frumpy in comparison, a spare appendage. She looked round the sparse room, vaguely hoping for the reassuring sight of a kettle. No, she couldn't even make the tea here.

'Ready?' the Doctor asked.

Ailla shrugged.

The Doctor flipped a switch and even from her bad vantage point, Jo could see the three inch LCD warm into a green glow. She stood, walked over to stand next to the Doctor, on the other side to Ailla. The redhead was peering at the display with a raised eyebrow, trying not to be impressed.

'What are we looking at?' Jo asked.

'This instrument traces anything with a value over 0.2 on the Bocca scale,' the Doctor said.

Ailla glanced at Jo's frown and threw her a sympathetic smile. 'It's tracking down anything that shows signs of having time travelled extensively. See here,' she point at a faint cluster of green dots in the centre of the display, 'that's us and the Doctor's TARDIS.'

She tapped the screen over a much brighter dot near the top. Jo wondered if all of the Doctor's people had a habit of whacking delicate equipment to see if it was working.

'That's the baby we're after. It's pumping out so much energy that I'm surprised we can't see the glow from here. It's only a couple of klicks away, on the old show ground near the spaceport, I think.'

The prototype had realised, back when it ripped a hole in space-time, that it would need a new pilot.

The damage done to it by the creatures of the Vortex and its own frantic resetting had burnt out connections, disabled circuits. The outer plasma shell was damaged, corroded, weakened. Energy levels had been depleted.

It wanted, it needed, reconnection, completion.

A distress signal had been triggered when it burst into this planet, one that only beings with innate knowledge of time travel would pick up. As soon as their skin touched its, it would know, would find the energy signature in their brain, unfold for them.

The prototype tightened its outer plasma shell, waited for its new partner.

Ka'eal looked about the wasteland, unimpressed. The spaceport indicated that humans had, if not colonised, then at least decided to live on this disgusting planet. The soldier units had encountered only one live human as they secured the area. The Science Officer did not think the remains were worth scanning for information. She paused by them anyway. Since stepping out onto the surface, the nagging behind her eye socket had got worse. It felt like the brand was pulsing, trying to push its way outwards into the rest of her brain. As she had approached the primary target it had got worse. It was her responsibility to go on though, break the seal on the orders.

She stepped over the desiccated corpse and joined the CO by the target.

It was just a box. A small, plain oblong. They had come all this way for this?

No. It wasn't just a box. Everything unfolded, layer *after layer.* She looked at the multi-dimensional box, saw its*blazing trail through the Vortex,* saw things on a *new scale.* Felt *the power of the black hole connected to the innermost core,* saw *stars caught in the endless moment of crossing the event horizon.* Sensed *something* trying to touch her mind, to connect her to *the universe. The power, the beautiful power. The possibilities it opened* for their race... *if she could just* touch...

She reached out a gloved hand to the outer plasma shell of the totality. The mental seal broke. The orders were there. Sharp, simple. Cold steel cutting through her brain.

'Destroy it,' she ordered.

The violent flashes of light from beyond the rise concerned Ailla.

They had walked out to the site in the end. There wasn't room in the speeder for Ailla and Jo, let alone the lanky frame of the Doctor. He had refused to allow Ailla to go on ahead in her vehicle though. So he didn't trust her that far. Not that she had expected him to; if whatever was there was salvageable, she'd have grabbed it and headed straight for her planet hopper. She hadn't been to her base on Limus Four for over two years.

The measured pulses of light troubled her: it suggested there were other interested parties. And it was giving her a headache.

'It looks like we have company,' the Doctor remarked calmly.

'No shit,' Ailla muttered, catching Jo's worried smile.

Ailla pulled her smaller weapon from a side pocket, offered it to the girl from UNIT. On the walk she had uncovered some details of Jo's training: she would be handy if there was a firefight. The ex time traveller could feel the Doctor's disapproving frown on her back, even as she pulled her preferred gun out, ran through its prep checks.

'I know you disapprove, Doctor, but I'm also sure you'd rather not get killed.'

He continued to glower at her, then brushed past, heading for the ridge, Jo trotting behind in her borrowed boots.

'Let's see who we're up against first, shall we?' he said acidly, 'Before we assume they are hostile?'

She could almost hear his effort not to lecture her about the use of weapons. He could be so sanctimonious. If it came to us or them, she thought, he'd be as selfish, as craven as anyone else.

'I hope someone does shoot you,' she muttered, before following.

It had started to rain again as they reached the ridge overlooking the abandoned arena, a steady presence, soaking into them immediately. Jo made sure she was between the two time travellers as they dropped, crawling forward to look towards the source of the pulsing light.

A heavy, dark spaceship dominated the area: short stubby landing tracks, the nose bristling with objects Jo hoped were sensors. The outer perimeter of the scrubby ground was encircled by six figures, holding large weapons with light grace, their slim, tall bodies encased in material. Their faces were hidden beneath hoods and visors. Four more figures surrounded an object in the middle distance, aiming a large laser canon at it, the light pulses getting faster and harsher as they stepped up the settings.

'Drahvin,' the Doctor said in a grim tone.

Jo looked at him, worried.

'Drahvidians, actually,' Ailla remarked much less dramatically, 'see the dark blue body armour, instead of silver?'

The Doctor raised an eyebrow at her, 'Oh, really?'

Ailla nodded, 'Oh yeah. It's an easy mistake to make, similar name, similar battle dress. Both destroyed their own planet. These are better military campaigners, though.' Ailla caught the Doctor and Jo's stares and smiled tightly.

'The Agency has...' she put a hand against her temple, 'had a bad habit of infodumping into our brains, except them being here now doesn't fit with what I remember of history.'

"Never mind that. I'd say whatever that object is, it's our target, wouldn't you?'

Ailla nodded.

'Any plans?' she asked.

Ka'eal watched the primary target impatiently. The box was absorbing the pulses from the laser, the energy diffusing without leaving a trace.

'Cease firing,' the CO snapped, coming over to her side.

The first shot took them by surprise, the blast spurting into the ground as the CO turned to face Ka'eal. The soldier units automatically pulled their weapons up to their shoulders and swung them in arcs, sweeping the edges of the area. An abandoned speeder on the edge of the site buckled and twisted as the nearest soldier opened fire on it, their weapon vaporising any water molecules left in the wreck.

Even as the CO yelled for them to wait for the targeting systems to kick in a second blast took one of the soldier units in the upper arm, hard enough to damage the battle dress. The unit grabbed at the wound, stemming the flood of poisonous air, then received the nod from the CO to fall back to the scout ship.

Ka'eal took cover behind the primary target, felt it try to reach her through her battle dress, the order code shifting about inside her brain, overwriting the box's message with its own. She should *take the box, study it, learn its secrets, grasp the potentiality.* Destroy it, wipe it from existence, strip it from the universe.

'Only one or two hostiles at the most. Likely objectives?' The CO was on the suitcom, wanting a situation appraisal. Ka'eal looked about. There had been no serious damage, only two soldier units down. She considered the line of soldiers, the approaches. Both units had come from the target area, none near the scout.

'They are interested in the primary target, not us.'

'Suggested strategy?'

'Fall back to the ship.'

There was a surprised silence down the comlink: it was against Directive procedure to retreat when they had superior firepower.

Ka'eal continued. 'We can use the bolters on the ship to destroy the target: achieve our objective without risking further depletion of soldier units.'

The Doctor watched as the Drahvidians fell back towards their scout craft, following neat point patterns. Partway along the ridge he saw Ailla resight her gun on the retreating figures, let off a volley of blasts at their heels. He was out from his cover immediately, racing across the empty space, ducking into the shadow of the object. He was hidden from the visual sensors of the craft here, safely tucked up close to the box.

Then he sensed it. It was a time travel capsule. He could feel the lines of force from it as it sat there, tugging reality into line with itself. He looked at its surface more closely, saw in the dulled white surface *the complex patterns of space-time, the shuddering, folding lines of the Vortex. An endless Celtic knot, looping and twisting around itself, reforming into Mobius spirals of causality.* It was unmistakable, he felt *its energy flood into him,* so long missed, so long desired. The capsule wanted, *needed a mind* to be with it. He *could take* *it, make it his own* as he had done before. Escape the inanities of his exile.

He glanced up, towards the women's position. There was a low running grey blur as Ailla scurried to a new position behind the desiccated speeder. That was what he might become, cut off from the swirling world of the Vortex, trapped in a narrow confine. A common thief, probably a murderer, eaten up with the desire to escape. All he had to do to avoid that was claim the capsule. The energy from it was throbbing through his mind now. *All he had to do was touch it, unlock it with his biodata, slip inside, slip away.*

His palm touched the side of the box, rough skin against the time blasted surface. It moulded itself around him.

From her new vantage point, Ailla could see both the Doctor, running a hand over the box's surface, frowning, and the scout ship. A scuffling behind her caused her to spin, a hand on the hilt of the force knife. Jo dropped, slightly out of breath, in the damp soil next to her, blonde hair turned to rats' tails in the rain.

'What's happening?' she asked.

'He's taking his bloody time, that's what,' Ailla snapped back. She had insisted that the girl stayed with her, knowing the Doctor would be incapable of leaving Jo behind. Quite capable of leaving her though, as he had before. She looked over the scout ship again. There was something wrong there: something that screamed that it was as dislocated as the time travellers, as anachronistic, if only she could see it. She knew that the Drahvidians shouldn't be here, now, not this advanced, spatially or technologically.

There!

There was a sensor array to one side of the scout that looked freshly grafted on. There was something familiar in the design, nagging in her head like that damned throbbing ache. The headache that had started when she got that signa...

Jo's nudge brought her attention to the wasteland. Ailla muttered a crude word in her own language: she'd almost grasped it then. Looking up, she saw the Doctor was beckoning her over urgently.

Ailla dropped to the dirt beside the Doctor, scowling.

'There's something odd about that ship,' she remarked, 'I just can't place it.'

She shook her head, pushed the wet tendrils of hair off her face, continued to frown at the Drahvidian craft.

'Ailla. I need your help to open the capsule.'

She finally looked at him then, raising an eyebrow, and saw how much it was costing him to ask her for help. His mouth was set hard, but his eyes...

'I can't open it, Ailla, because its looking for the Imprimatur as the key and that was stripped from me when I was... exiled.'

Her eyes widened and she laughed: throwing her head back, her mouth wide, laughing to the rain. It was the best thing she had heard in twelve years.

'You were exiled? *You were caught?*

'Ailla...'

'OK.' She grinned at him, enjoying the annoyed discomfort on his face. She looked properly at the surface of the box they were crouched beside now. Gasped. How could she have not seen it? The headache expanded, *unfurling layers of brilliance,* filling her mind *with colours overlaid, yet not merging, the finery of the Vortex. Like a biiiion translucent butterfly wings, beating a uncertain rhythm of possibilities.*

'It's beautiful,' she whispered, and touched her bare hand to the surface.

The box opened for them.

Away from the primary target, her mind cleared. The orders were clear. Ka'eal fed the targeting system with its orders, overrode the commands that prohibited using the laser bolters in an atmosphere. The CO nodded approval and hit the button that would charge up the weaponry.

The control room was cramped, choking. Black marks across every surface. Ailla moved directly to the controls, staring at the mass of switches and dials. She could feel it, tying itself to her, splicing their data together. It was what she longed for. Freedom, movement, *the caress of travel.* She *wanted, needed, must use this capsule.*

Then the stench hit her, making her put the back of her hand to her nose and mouth, brought her back in focus. The Doctor was stood to one side of the room, looking down, revulsion on his face. Ailla joined him, saw too soon the remains, fused through the walls, realised the black stains were blood. She looked up, gagging, met the Doctor's horrified expression.

'Something must have gone wrong,' he said quietly, 'It's a risk the pioneers took.'

Ailla turned back to the controls, looking past the stains.

'Is it operative, do you think?' she asked.

'I think it's far too dangerous to try, don't you?' The Doctor knelt by a panel, wincing in distaste as his knee touched the marked floor. The sonic screwdriver took off the cover plate and Ailla leant over to peer into the innards. There were almost recognisable features to the components. The Doctor reached in one hand, started to disconnect something that might evolve into a dematerialisation circuit. Ailla's hand reached in over his, held it hard, stilled.

'Hadn't we better discuss this?' she asked coldly.

Jo shivered slightly, wrapped her coat tighter about her. She had watched uneasily as Ailla and the Doctor disappeared inside whatever that box was, convinced that the Drahvidians would reappear from their craft at any moment and she would be unable to warn them. A shifting, grating sound from the craft made her look up. Something on the belly was moving, turning. Large, blackened as if from firing, lining itself up with the object.

She was running towards the box before she even checked her own safety.

The thumping from outside, Jo's unintelligible warnings, galvanised them. The Doctor grabbed the prototype dematerialisation circuit, Ailla ripped a dimensional stabiliser free of its housing.

'We need to get out of here,' the Doctor warned as Ailla pulled a second panel off, started tugging at another component, grazing her knuckles in her urgency.

'For goodness sake, woman, leave it!'

Ailla shot him a murderous look. She almost slipped on the uneven, soiled floor as the part fell free. The Doctor was already on the threshold, taking with him the demat circuit. The circuit that would save her years of work. She scrambled across the floor after him.

Ka'eal nodded to the CO, who pressed the firing trigger. The vibrations of using the bolter in an atmosphere rocked the ship, causing the two Drahvidians to exchange uneasy glances. An alarm somewhere started pinging, demanding attention. The bolter finished its first cycle and the Science Officer checked her comp readings.

'It's gone.'

'Destroyed?'

'I assume so,' Ka'eal said, although the pleased silence of her marked brain confirmed it to her. She started to punch in the new co-ordinates. Another search pattern, hunting down the time technology. Someone, somewhere wanted things put back, time travel slowed in its progress and the Directive had agreed. Ka'eal didn't know or care who they were dealing with, so long as the future of her race had been assured by the contract. It was, after all, not her job to question the Directive.

They had walked back in silence. Ailla had led, her shoulders betraying her disappointment, the Doctor and Jo following. They stopped, awkward, in the street, standing next to the blue shell of the TARDIS. The Doctor put his key into the lock, turned back to his fellow time-traveller.

'If you wanted...?'

'No, Doctor. I'm not about to exchange what little freedom I have for the closed world of your exile.'

Jo moved to Ailla's side, moved by the look of implacable misery on the woman's face. Maybe being a gun-toting, catsuited spy wasn't so appealing. Not if it left you alone, betrayed, untrusting. She offered Ailla the gun she had borrowed.

'Thanks, Jo, you were a help,' Ailla said as she took it, tucked it back into her belt, embraced the UNIT girl in a light hug.

'Really?'

'Oh yes.'

Jo felt herself spun round in Ailla's grip, something metal-cold against her neck.

'The Doctor always is a fool when it comes to his friends,' Ailla continued.

'Ailla...' The Doctor took a step forward, flinching as the hilt of the force knife was pressed to Jo's flesh, his indecision apparent.

'No, Doctor. You know as well as I do that it takes only a tiny pressure to activate the blade. Give me the demat circuit.'

The Doctor, reached for his pocket, his face hard with contempt. He flung the component down, into the gutter, so hard it bounced and rolled into the road.

Jo found herself released, pushed towards the Doctor. He was grabbing her arm, bundling her into the TARDISbefore she could react. She glimpsed Ailla, a triumphant grin on her face, mud dripping from her arm as she lifted up the circuit and then the doors were closed and the time rotor was already in motion.

The journey was done mostly in silence. Jo had perched on the lone armchair, her damp hair dripping into the upholstery. The Doctor had kept his back to her, tense and unbending. She thought he watched the time rotor, she tried not to imagine his face.

It was her fault: she had been too trusting again, let her admiration for Ailla's life and skill blind her to the acts a desperate person would carry out. She knew what a working dematerialisation circuit meant to the Doctor's freedom. She had seen the anger, the barely concealed misery his exile caused him, the fury that these missions he was sent on created. The momentary indecision in his eyes when Ailla had forced him to chose.

'I'm sorry, ' she ventured quietly.

He turned to face her then, his face softening.

'It wasn't a choice, not really. There are some prices I'd never pay.' He smiled then, a sad, gentle genuine smile.

'You need a good strong cup of tea, Ms. Grant.'

She smiled back, tremulous still, realising her chill in her wet clothes. Nothing sounded better, right now, than curling up with a cup of tea and a trashy old paperback.

The trials, sending the lashed-up unit forward in time a few seconds, had worked. Organic material had come through intact, as far as her test equipment could tell. Ailla fitted the crystals she had stolen from the vault on Cassius5 into their sockets on the Time Ring. The green one in the eye of the snake design glinted at her, winking. She was set to go forward a single day, a simple trial. She double-checked she had everything essential in her pockets, triple-checked the connections, fitted the Ring around her wrist. She took a look around the tatty room, looked out at the gathering gloom of yet another rainstorm, weighed her options one final time. Was it worth the risk?

'What the hell...'

Ailla took a deep breath, closed her eyes and activated the Time Ring.

"Invasion of the Dinosaurs by Sarah Jane Smith"

By
Mike Sivier

'Anybody ho-ome?'

The sing-song greeting was followed into the UNIT laboratory by the sprightly face of Sarah Jane Smith. Her smile of greeting quickly became a pout of disappointment as she realised the room was empty.

'Oh. Nobody home!'

She scuffed her way over to the workbench, noting with a tinge of regret the significantly empty space in the corner. She stuck out her lower lip in childlike disappointment - but then gasped and leapt forward as she saw the note on the desktop.

'Sarah -' (it read) 'I'm just off on a quick jaunt to see if I can't find Fluorana after all. I'd like to be back before anyone notices I'm gone, so if you do get to read this it means the old girl's being temperamental about when she arrives.

'Get your goodies together - we both need a holiday!' It was signed, simply, 'D' - and dated several days previously.

Sarah giggled. 'Oh well, I suppose I'll see you when I see you!' she murmured.

She was about to leave - but then she thought better of it and moved back to the workbench. Turning over the note, she wrote on the other side: 'I thought you'd like to see what I've been doing while we waited for you to come back. Get your reading glasses on!'

She had been carrying a large folder. Opening it, Sarah pulled out a scrapbook - her collection of clippings from the press - and opened it at the spread relating to an adventure she had shared with her friend in the not-too-distant past...

Whitaker whisked away Was it time travel?

July 12, 1973

SCIENTISTS across the world have expressed their shock - or relief - today at the disappearance of Professor Miles Whitaker.

The eminent British scientist is believed to have abandoned his London home earlier this week. The alarm was raised by his housekeeper.

Whitaker created a schism in the scientific community earlier this year, when he claimed to have developed a workable theory about time travel. He even applied for a large Government grant to pursue his theories to their conclusion - but it was refused. Whitaker himself is said to have put off committee members, because of his quarrels with other scientists. Insiders said he must have been bitterly disappointed when the Government refused to help him develop his theories.

Then, earlier this week, he completely vanished. Never before in his life had he gone off without telling anyone of his whereabouts - holidays, attending international conferences, and so on. This was why the alarm has been raised so quickly.

Sir Charles Grover was chairman of the Government committee that considered Whitaker's application for a grant - and actually saw the professor's working papers. He said: 'My scientific advisors assured me they were utter nonsense. All I can say is that the man is, or was, a harmless crank. His ideas about time travel were completely useless.'

But colleagues who were at Oxford with him tell a different story. Along with the science correspondent of The Times and several scientific journals, they say he was brilliant.

Oxford colleague Henry Wingate said: 'He was a man ahead of his time. His general and special theories of time travel were beyond any ever imagined before - or, I daresay - for a long time to come. But he lacked the resources to carry his theories to their logical conclusion and this laid him open to the unfair criticisms we have heard.'

He said: 'Perhaps Professor Whitaker has taken himself to people who have more time for him.'

A police spokesman added: 'A lot of people do disappear. They leave home, change their names, and try to make new lives for themselves. You never know what pressures people are really going under.'

Martial Law January 19, 1974

THE proud people of London were turned into refugees today as the Government declared Martial Law and evacuated the city.

But cabinet ministers and Army officers are keeping quiet as to the reason for the panic. An official statement, sent to this newspaper yesterday evening, said simply: 'A state of emergency has been declared in areas of central London. It has become necessary to declare that area under martial law. All members of the general public within the designated area are to vacate their homes at once. If they cannot find accommodation elsewhere, it will be provided for them.'

Commentators have speculated on whether the declaration could be linked to alleged sightings of giant creatures on the streets of the city - and in one case, in the air.

But a police spokesman dismissed the theory as 'utterly ludicrous'. Speaking from Metropolitan Police headquarters, the spokesman said: 'Whatever next - the bogeyman? This is an Army matter, and they are keeping a tight lid on whatever the problem is. But I can assure you that giant monsters play no part in it. This is the capital city of the United Kingdom of Great Britain, Northern Ireland and its Commonwealth - it's not a Godzilla movie.'

A spokesman for the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce, which has taken command of the military operation in the city, condoned the police view. Speaking from a makeshift operations centre, a Captain Yates said: 'We cannot confirm or deny any rumours made by the public. Nor can we make any outright statements of our own - orders is orders, I'm afraid. But we can ask the general public to keep their heads. I think our best advice would be: If you live in London, move yourself to a safe distance as defined by the Government. If you don't, then sit tight and wait to see what happens.' Capt Yates was unwilling to say more than that - but he did scotch speculations that the hazard could be nuclear, caused by terrorists. 'That's not at the top of our list,' he said.

City of ghosts January 21, 1974

LONDON lay deserted yesterday as a state of emergency gripped the capital.

The only human beings left in the city were the military, looters, and the dead.

But nobody knows seems to know why the evacuation has been ordered. As martial law took effect, London has taken on the aspect of a modern-day Mary Celeste. The front doors of houses and shops are unlocked and open to all visitors - who would find the contents intact but totally abandoned. All the residents have vanished - as though they never existed.

And here, as in that famous incident of the 19th century, partly eaten meals are left on plates in dining-rooms across the city. No-one ever discovered what happened to the people on board the Mary Celeste, and they never will. But in London, yesterday, the situation was different. The residents were ordered to go by the Government and the military. But despite repeated queries to representatives of both, nobody will give the one answer everybody wants to know.

Why?

Leviathans of London January 25, 1974

MONSTERS are at large in London.

That is the reason the city is under martial law - according to Army sources. And the Armed Forces are tightening their grip on the evacuated central area of London. With 10 million evacuees to manage, reinforcements are being drafted in from other parts of the country.

Their orders are that looters are to be shot dead on sight - while their military colleagues hunt the mysterious creatures which have caused the chaos in the capital. The first sighting is said to have been two weeks ago, on Hampstead Heath. Children playing on the Heath returned home to tell their mother they had seen a dinosaur. Naturally, she did not believe them.

So they found some friends - other youths - and took them to have another look at the creature. Their bodies were found a few hours later. Due to restrictions imposed under martial law, none of the deceased have been identified, although their families and the coroner have all been informed. As the families have not been named, they were not available for comment. The coroner has been evacuated. That same day, some sort of large bird was seen flying over Hyde Park by both citizens and tourists.

But paleontologists soon realised it was not a bird but a kind of flying creature that has not existed on this planet for more than 65 million years - a Pterodactyl. And that night another creature, believed to be a Tyrannosaurus Rex, appeared by the Festival Hall. Its passage through the car park resulted in the destruction of 200 vehicles, rendered into wreckage by its teeth and tail.

The next day, the monsters were everywhere - killing, crushing motor cars, even - in one case - walking straight through a house. Panic broke out in the city. Everyone with a car has packed everything they could get into it and fled into the country. The Government declared martial law in London and ordered the remainder of the populace to leave. Trains and buses were arranged, taking the 10 million refugees to large country estates or huge, makeshift camps. But some have stayed behind - either to brave the terrors stalking the city streets, or more likely to loot the deserted capital, seeing it as easy pickings. If caught by the military, they will pay the price.

Those captured without a struggle can expect a military trial. But looters who do try to escape can expect a bullet, from soldiers whose orders are to shoot to maim - or to kill if they have to.

The most fearful creature ever to live leaned drunkenly against the wall of the factory, its little two-fingered hands flaying the air hopelessly - and crumpled forwards in a dead faint.

February 14, 1974

It was the first victory in the war against the prehistoric creatures which have been trampling central London beneath their reptilian feet - and it was due to the bravery of one man.

Captain Mike Yates of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce turned what looked like a rout into victory with his quick thinking.

UNIT had tracked down a Brontosaurus to a narrow street near a small factory. There, soldiers were to test a new 'stun gun', designed to bring the creatures to heel. But when the gun was directed at the creature by a UNIT scientist - it failed to have any effect. In fact, its use appeared to summon the Tyrannosaurus Rex.

The giant Brontosaurus filled the little street, as long as a railway coach and 30 tons in bulk. A head as high as a three-story house swung round at the end of its long neck as it tried to follow the soldiers assembling beneath it. Its tail whipped round and pushed down a high brick wall at the end of the street as it backed away from the UNIT man taking careful aim. He pulled the trigger of the stun gun... and nothing happened.

As if in response to the actions of the military, a 30ft Tyrannosaurus Rex appeared at the other end of the narrow street. It blocked the exit as the Brontosaurus seemed to vanish from existence. The situation looked grim - but then Captain Yates leapt to the attack and saved the day. He fired two bullets at the monster's head to distract it, hitting its huge jaws with his second bullet. He grabbed the stun gun, which had been dropped by its previous user. Rolling onto his back, he aimed its sights at the Tyrannosaurus's head and pulled the trigger.

And this time, it fell.

UNIT experts were at a loss to explain the initial failure of their stunning device as this report was filed. But a spokesman was able to explain the principles behind its use: It relies on the relative velocity of molecular reaction to temporarily neutralise the creature's brain cells. This apparently means its brain is affected by a directional beam carrying a small power charge - causing it to faint.

> The plan was that, after it fainted, UNIT scientists would surround it with an electrical field and wait for it to disappear. The manner of its disappearance - the way it disturbed the UNIT electrical field - would

enable scientists to work out the source of the power which is moving these creatures through the capital. London remains in a state of Martial Law as the soldiers carry out their plan.

Lizard under the lens February 15, 1974

These are the pictures that prove dinosaurs are still stalking the streets of the capital.

They were taken at a security hanger somewhere in London earlier today, and clearly show a Tyrannosaurus Rex - in chains. But the chains failed to hold it - as our intrepid photographer Sarah Jane Smith discovered when the beast tore apart the hanger facility, trampled its way into the twilight... and vanished. Miss Smith said it was only luck that kept her from becoming the great lizard's lunch. The creature was caught two days ago by troops from UNIT - the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce - using a new 'stun gun' developed specifically for the task.

Members of the military organisation were hoping to use it to track down human beings who they believe are responsible for unleashing the monsters on the capital. They were hazy about how this was supposed to happen - and now it seems their plans will come to nothing as the escape of the Tyrannosaurus was not monitored.

But this has brought another mystery to light: Examinations of the chains which had been used to bind it show they were partly sawn through. And a directional detector, rigged to show the creature's location, was also sabotaged. It failed to produce a single reading.

UNIT - and particularly General Finch, in command of the Army in London since Martial Law was introduced - are left with two vital questions:

WHO sabotaged the tracking equipment and the chains?

And, more importantly, WHY?

Golden Age goes up in smoke February 18, 1974

THE dinosaur invasion of London is over - if it ever happened in the first place.

Today, we can exclusively reveal how the city, the Government and the country at large were duped by a group of lunatics, hell-bent on taking the world back to their imagined Golden Age - an age that never existed.

All but two of these madmen are now in custody.

The others are missing, believed dead, after their dream went up in a puff of smoke.

The plan, entitled Operation Golden Age, was the brainchild of Miles Whitaker, a nutty professor who recruited influential help in creating his new world order from Sir Charles Grover, minister with special powers, and Army General Finch. Together they hatched their diabolical plot.

Together they brainwashed high-standing members of society into believing civilisation as it stands is corrupt, de-humanising and ultimately harmful - and offered them an alternative.

Among them was Captain Mike Yates of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce - UNIT - who fed misinformation to the public and the press, including the cover story that dinosaurs were responsible for the situation in London.

Whitaker and Grover won over Captain Yates, along with the others, with claims that they had discovered a way to cross vast distances of space in a short time. They offered their victims a chance to blast off with them to colonise another world - a New Earth, free of the mistakes of the old.

Among those who Whitaker and the others tricked into joining their cause were the athlete John Crichton, the conservationist Lady Cullingford and novelist Nigel Castle. But the snippet of information the conspirators neglected to give away was this: Their fantastic space ship never existed!

Instead, the dupes of Operation Golden Age were put to sleep in a bunker beneath London while the dastardly plotters pulled off the next phase of their scheme. With help from Grover and Finch, Whitaker created a hallucinogenic nerve gas inducing, for anyone unlucky enough to breathe it in, the illusion that they were under attack by creatures from the dinosaur era.

Reports became rife that huge reptiles from the dawn of time were appearing across London. Panic spread like wildfire and the capital was evacuated - leaving Whitaker and his cronies to complete their master plan in relative peace.

Throughout the first phases of the project, the embittered Whitaker - whose outlandish theories of time travel had been rejected by the scientific community - had been perfecting his ultimate weapon - and his revenge on his tormentors.

He had been developing a device capable of destroying all human life on the planet - wiping it clean for the arrival of his chosen people and preparing the way for them to create his so-called Golden Age. All with the proper guidance from its architect, of course.

Only the actions of brave and independent-minded members of the armed forces - and in particular the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce (UNIT) - stopped the madman from finishing his deadly project, and saved the day. They tracked him to his secret lair beneath a London Underground station and confronted the evil scientist before he could complete his evil experiment. But rather than give up the ghost, Whitaker activated his device prematurely - and was engulfed in the effect as it went haywire. Both he and his co-conspirator Sir Charles Grover literally went up in smoke!

Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart of UNIT mopped up the mess. He told us: Tm afraid the science of it isn't my thing. Perhaps it's best to say the villains have been dealt with, and now we can all get on with our lives. And sleep a little more safely in our beds.'

We tried to track down UNIT'S scientific advisor - a Doctor Smith - but Brigadier Stewart became unhelpful when asked about his whereabouts. He said the doctor was on holiday at a place called Fluorana - but Fluorana does not appear on any atlas of the world.

Queried about this, Brigadier Stewart said: 'Well, quite. When you find it, be sure to let me know where it is, won't you?'

That was the last of the clippings. Next to the scrapbook, Sarah placed a brand-new copy of a glossy magazine which had clearly been newly printed. She opened it proudly to display a two-page article:

The Golden Age and beyond: how the nightmare masks the dream By Sarah Jane Smith

LOOKING around London today, one would never think the city had been emptied a few weeks ago.

Once again, the streets are full of people, all going about their everyday business of shopping and sightseeing, commerce and crime. Industry and pollution.

The lessons of the Operation: Golden Age crisis have been swept under the city's collective carpet. And why not? It isn't as if there was anything practical to be learnt, is it?

That is how the reasoning goes, it seems.

The refugees have been re-homed, and the city has resumed its life - almost as if nothing had happened here. To people living elsewhere in the country, it may seem as though the emergency - and the tragedy - was a work of make-believe, like a fantasy told to children on television.

The official line is that Professor Miles Whitaker and his fellow conspirators spread hallucinogenic gas through the city to rid it of its population while they worked on a weapon to rid the world of anyone they disliked - but their scheme was halted in its tracks by clever members of the military.

Claims that martial law was declared after dinosaurs were seen roaming the city have been discredited. After all, this is London - not a Godzilla movie - right?

This version makes a nice story, and ensures that people can sleep peacefully at night. But it ignores a few awkward loose ends which suggest that maybe Godzilla was on the loose after all. The youngsters on Hampstead Heath are really dead. Army clear-up teams are still occupying sites across the city - sites which were pinpointed as areas of dinosaur activity during the supposed gas attacks. Hundreds of thousands of pounds worth of building materials have been sent to these sites.

And there is the small matter of the photographs, published to millions, of a living, breathing, Tyrannosaurus Rex.

The questions raised are simple and clear-cut. What if dinosaurs really did invade? And, why should the people be deceived about it?

Perhaps the answer to the first question would be because it is difficult to accept the bad guys had superior technology. And possibly the answer to the last is, because those bad guys might just have had the right motives.

It is easy to dismiss others - especially those who have failed - as evil, as enemies of the people, enemies of freedom, enemies of the State. Much less easy is any attempt to understand them.

Much of the Golden Agers' reasons for carrying out their plan made sense; they wanted a better world. Only their methods were at fault.

It is a fact that the architects of Operation: Golden Age created a mock-up of a space ship - in reality a disused nuclear bunker deep beneath London.

Inside, for the benefit of those adherents who found their faith flagging, was a place they called the Reminder Room. Those placed within its walls were exposed to an audiovisual presentation of the evils of the modern world, while those in charge told them it was there as a reminder of what had been chosen by the population of the world they were leaving behind - a world of moral degradation, permissiveness, cheating, lying, and cruelty.

The film showed scenes we all know to exist: Mounds of wrecked cars, factory chimneys belching filth into the sky, oil-drenched beaches, dead fish on polluted rivers, traffic jams, jet planes roaring over crowded cities.

The commentary reinforced the message: 'Ever since the Industrial Revolution, man has polluted his planet; until now his only home. Not only has man ruined his own environment, he has made life impossible for other living creatures. 75 species of animals were made extinct in the first 75 years of this century. Others are threatened. The giant lemurs of Madagascar may soon suffer the same fate as the King Kangaroos of Australia.'

The film goes on to show a similar plight facing many human beings: 'After two hours controlling traffic, a Tokyo policeman must be given one full hour of oxygen treatment. So much for the pleasure of motoring. Man is the only animal to prey on his own species. As society breaks down, armed gangsters take over. In America, with 50 murders a day, law-abiding citizens live behind electrified fences to keep criminals out. The brutalisation of millions of people extends from the factories to the buildings in which they live. To accommodate an ever-increasing population, vast tenement blocks are thrown up in our cities, providing no sense of community for the unfortunates who dwell in them. Gone is the concept of the village.

'Greed and aggression lead to the greatest crime of all - war. With the hydrogen bomb, man now has the choice of destroying his planet quickly through war, or slowly through pollution.'

The film goes on in a similar vein.

What if the architects of Operation: Golden Age really had found a way to travel in time? What if they had learned how to scoop dinosaurs from their proper era and dump them in the present day? Considering all the areas still off-limits to all but the military, is that so impossible to imagine?

And consider this: What if that was not their main aim? What if Professor Whitaker, Sir Charles Grover and the others did not want to bring dinosaurs to the present day?

What if their aim had been to roll back time itself - to what they called the Golden Age? What if their aim had been to erase the modern world from the history books? To 'make it never was', as an upset youngster might put it. Given the evidence - or lack of it - is it so impossible to believe that could have been the intent?

Is it harder to believe that theory than it is to believe that these men wanted to destroy all life in a holocaust to make way for their New World Order? Especially in the light of their own indoctrination film?

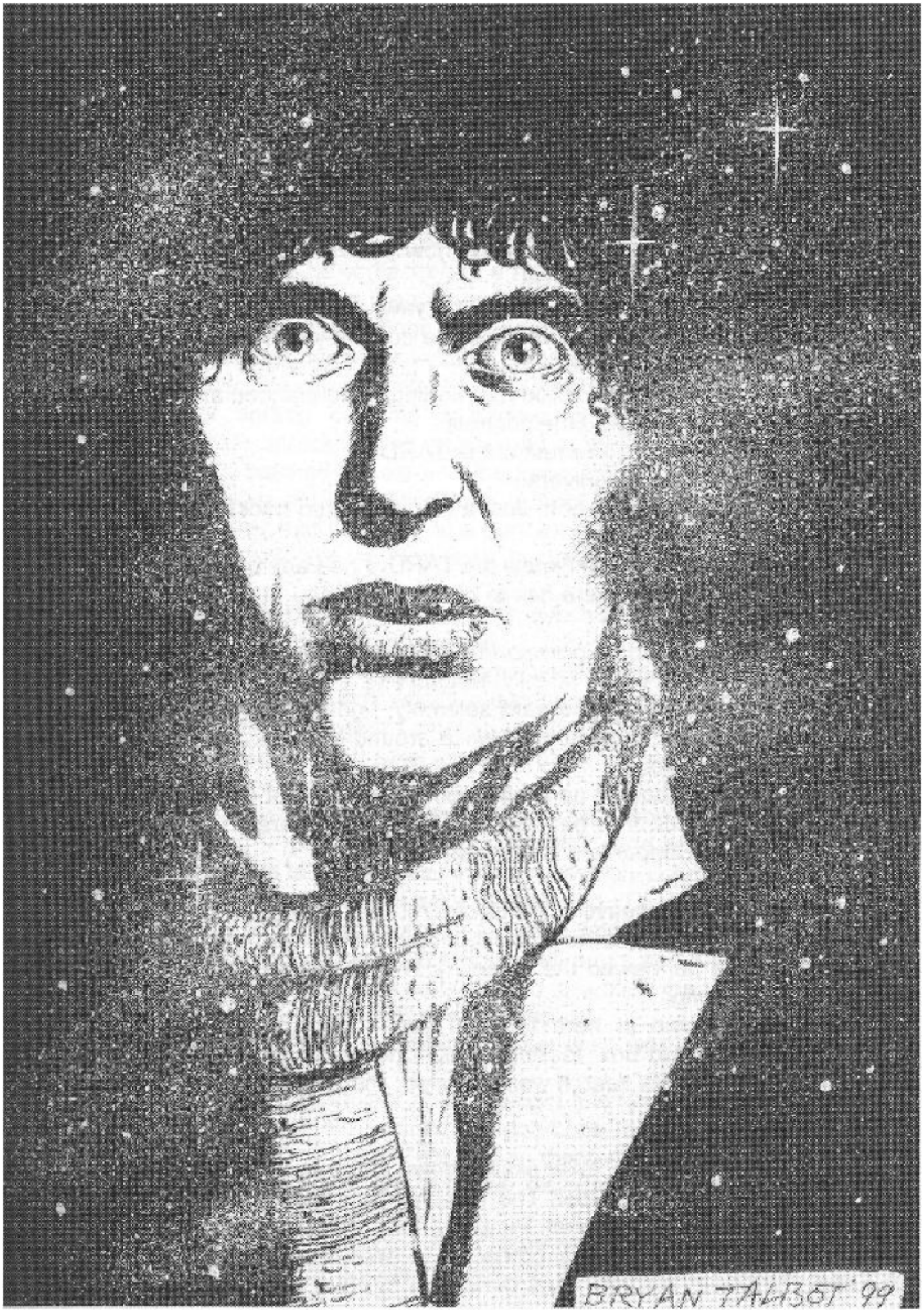
Whatever their purpose was, any discussion of it is academic. Both Whitaker and Grover are gone; they won't be answering any questions about it. We are left in the world they despised, with the questions they raised. The problems of pollution, overpopulation and crime are huge - and largely ignored.

Is it not time we woke up to what we are doing to our planet - before it is too late? Although the big decisions are left to governments and the most powerful corporations, responsibility lies with us all; our complicity gives weight to their actions.

So isn't it time you asked yourself: What have I done recently to save the world?

Sarah left the magazine open on the workbench, alongside her book of clippings. There they would remain until her friend came back to read them. As she hit the light switch on the way out, she turned back and smiled into the now-darkening laboratory.

'Congratulations, Doctor,' she spoke into the darkness. 'You've managed the impossible again. You gave a journalist a conscience!'


BRYAN TALBOT 99

Knitworld
By
Stephen Marley
A Fourth Doctor story in the Missing Companion Series
set somewhere between the Third and Fifth Doctors

'… and then imagine our surprise when the inspector called with the missing boxing glove and the purloined nostrum. How we all laughed! So, you see, the relationship between myself and Susan in my first incarnation is not in the least bit enigmatic.'

Sarah nodded at the conclusion of the Doctor's account, which had taken the best part of two hours. 'Yes, of course, it's so obvious now you've explained it. I should have worked it out myself. Now it all makes sense...'

'Anyway, enough of that,' he said with a long yawn, stretching his arms and rising to tip-toe. 'I'd better do the rounds. Care to keep me company? I can pass the time with another tale, concerning my scarf.'

'No, I'm off to my room to catch up on my reading.' She glanced around the control room. 'I thought you'd already checked the controls.'

'Oh, not this boring old room. The rest of the

TARDIS.'

'What - all of it? That's a mini-universe.'

'Well, I don't intend to check all of it. Just a few neglected nooks and crannies, not to mention the back doors.'

Sarah gave a slight frown. 'I didn't know the TARDIS had any back doors.'

'Where's there's a front door there has to be a back door - at least one - stands to reason. Exits only, of course.'

She threw up her hands, her expression the soul of sarcasm. 'But of course. Exits only. If they were entrances that would be silly, wouldn't it?'

'Indeed it would, Sarah,' he said solemnly, 'indeed it would.' With that, he swept out the room, swirling the scarf at least twice around his neck, trailing words in his wake: 'I think I'll go down the tubes.'

By the time she'd thought up a witty riposte, he was out of earshot. Grumping under her breath, she marched into her room and slammed herself down on the bed where a hefty copy of David Copperfield lay in wait.

'0, what tangled webs we weave...' the Doctor murmured, watching a spider spin its web in a dusty combination attic/cellar a few hundred yards from the control room. A frown puzzled his brow as he viewed the spider. 'How did that get in here? The things one pick up as one goes along...'

Now what had he come in here for? Ah yes - a means of locomotion. He rummaged about in a cardboard box, tossing stylophones, spirographs, gyroscopes and gonks aside until the object of his search was revealed. His lips curved in a wonky smile. 'Time to get my skates on.'

The Doctor, hands in pockets, roller-skated down a series of corridors whose walls were covered in William Morris wallpaper. The 1952 Earth skates had been enhanced by 23rd century technology from the planet Picayune and were remarkably fast on the straight and satisfyingly smooth on the corners. He sped on his way to the nearest vacuum-tube some two miles distant. 'Must remember to have a new vacuum-tube fitted close to the control room,' he mumbled to himself, then remembered that he had mumbled the same thing to himself on previous rounds. Passing one of the closed- circuit cameras, he gave it a wave. 'Helio, OmniLookout, I hope you're keeping a few billion eyes on things,' he said, grinning at the camera lens.

Then the Terror Trumpet blew. Its ear-splitting *tarra-ta-ta-tarrara-ta-ta-ta* echoed down empty corridors and resounded in deserted chambers.

The TARDIS intruder alarms were highly sophisticated (when they worked properly, which was a fifty-fifty chance at best) and could distinguish between six classes of intruder: benign blunderers; well-intentioned intrepid adventurers; mischievous scamps; malignant villains; megalomaniac superfiends and - signalled by the Terror Trumpet - Nameless Terrors.

He listened to the notes of the trumpet, its pattern identifying the general location of the threat as the Unpainted Back Door region. Its message delivered, the Terror Trumpet subsided into a welcome silence.

Pressing the roller-skates to breakneck speed, he whizzed down the passages. After two fleeting minutes he screeched to a halt beside an oversized vacuum-tube niche. Kicking off the skates, he open the man-sized canister, dived in, slammed the panel shut and punched in the Unpainted Door co-ordinates on a miniature console. The canister shot down the tubes at a ridiculous velocity. Time concertinaed. Space performed several peculiar antics. Then the canister whished to a halt and normality was restored.

The Doctor sprang out into a narrow, dilapidated corridor which, for some unfathomable reason, struck him as crabby and crotchety. At the end of the corridor was a warped door with cracked panels and the knob missing. The door was partially open, showing a vertical slice of planet Picayune. In front of the door stood a plump woman in her late fifties, her grey hair tied back in a bun, a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. She was busy with a mop and bucket, sloshing suds across the uneven floorboards.

Mouth agape, the Doctor thumped a hand to his forehead. 'Mrs Moggins! I forgot all about you! Why - you must have been here...'

Three bleedin' years,' said Mrs Moggins, still sloshing away with the suds. A bit o' cleaning and dusting from a lady what's a dab hand at cleaning and dusting, that's what you said. Take not time at all, that's what you said. But I'm not one to complain...'

'Well, in a sense, it won't take any time at all. I'll return you to the instant you left from - where was it - Slough, er,1948?'

Her eyes narrowed. 'That's still three years' char-money you owe me.'

'It will be paid - possibly in gold statuettes, and you'll be returned home,' he assured, 'but first I have to deal with an intruder, possibly cosmos-threatening.'

Mrs Moggins gave a weary shake of the head. 'Lawks-a-mercy... Cosmos this - cosmos that. Flitting about interdimensional space-time like I don't know what. All manner of goings-on and odd folk coming and going at all hours and most of them no better than they ought to be. It's not like it was when I used to a bit of cleaning for MisterFantastico. But I mind my own business. I'm not one to complain.'

'Excellent, Mrs Moggins, excellent. By the way, was it you who opened the door and did anyone come in?'

'Don't blame me, he just kept on knocking. I told him the door was exit only, but no, he wouldn't have any of it. So I rattled the doorknob to show him what's what, and the blasted knob came off in my hand. That's when the door flew open and he barged in, bold as you like. I suppose the spatial-temporal dislocation of the doorknob reversed the polarity field of the door or something.'

'Something like that I suppose,' the Doctor murmured absently as he picked up the doorknob, bunged it into its socket and swung the door shut. 'Could you describe the intruder?'

Mrs Moggins accomplished an extraordinary double-swivel of the cigarette with a mere twitch of her mouth. 'I paid him no heed. I mind my own business, but if you ask me, he - if it is a he - doesn't belong in no decent, respectable universe.' She threw a quick glance at the Doctor's trailing scarf. 'I'd watch out for that, if I were you. He'll be after that piece of knitting, you mark my words.'

He tilted his head, regarding her askance. 'I happened to mention my scarf to a friend no more than twenty minutes ago, just before I informed her of the back doors.

Shortly after the Terror Trumpet sounds it alarm, announcing an intruder who has slipped in through a back door. And now you make a cryptic remark connecting the interloper and my scarf. This is quite obviously an example of the acausal synchronicity principle as described by Jung and Pauli. Whenever the acausal synchronicity principle raises it head, there's usually a spot of bother.[1]

Mrs Moggins released a long, exasperated groan and straightened up from her labours. 'Alright - alright... There's no way two ways about it. I let the bleeder in and I'll have to help chuck him out. Come on, Doctor. Let's flush this johnny-come-lately out of the TARDIS.'

He gave a vigorous shake of the head. 'Not at all, Mrs Moggins. This could be extremely dangerous. You just put your feet up in some nearby kitchen and have a nice cup of tea. Leave it to me.'.

She brandished her mop with restrained aggression. 'While I've got this in my hand I'd like to see any alien hooligan get the better of me. Lead on, sir. I'll be right behind you.'

'That's very doughty of you, Mrs Moggins,' he said with undisguised admiration. 'Let us proceed.'

Scarf swirling, as was its wont, he strode away from the door and down the corridor, the cleaning lady in tow. They soon came to a wrought-iron spiral staircase that reared overhead to an unguessable vanishing point and plunged down below to vasty depths.

'Hmm... which way, I wonder?' he puzzled. 'Did the interloper strike you as an attic or cellar sort of chap?'

She waved her mop for no apparent reason. 'Attic, no two ways about it,' she responded firmly. 'He had something of the German Expressionist suggestion of subtle dread about him - curious angles and elongated shadows and the distant resonance of an eerie melody on a music box. The whole ensemble was redolent of the ineffable threat of the attic rather than the miasmal menace of the tenebrous recesses of the cellar, speaking in terms of archetypal symbology, and that's the up and the down of it, you mark my words.'

He pursed his lips. 'He certainly sounds like an attic type, but he could of course be in disguise. I've been caught like that before.'

'That's as may be, but the real give-away was that I saw him climbing up the spiral staircase. Like I said -

no two ways about it... attic type.'

'Then we could be in for a tricky, sticky time, to put it mildly. Nameless terrors associated with attics are notoriously difficult to pin down.'

'Ain't that the truth,' she said with a knowing sigh and a swivel of the cigarette.

'Did you know, Mrs Moggins, that attics represent the fear of being overwhelmed by knowledge whereas cellars represent the fear of being submerged by ignorance.'

She gave him a bit of a look. 'Did you just make that up?'

'Yes. And that may or may not mean that it's profoundly true.'

She have him a dig in the ribs with her elbow. 'Oh, go on with you sir - you and your paradoxical banter replete with metaphysical non-sequitors, making fun of a body.'

His eyebrows lofted in surprise. 'Banter? Why does everyone always think - oh, never mind.' He planted a foot on the spiral stair, then paused and gave a backward glance, brow furrowed. 'There's one thing that bothers me, Mrs Moggins. Your speech is generally that of a stereotypical char-lady, but it constantly lapses into highly uncharacteristic stylistic flourishes embellished with adjectival curlicues.'

She gave a slow nod. 'I know. I picked it up from

Mister Fantastico the escapologist

- best employer I ever had.'

He brightened immediately. 'Oh, I see - well, that's all right then. Let's be on our way

- it's quite a distance up to the nearest attic.' With that, he sprang up the stairs and instantly tripped over the hem of his scarf. He sprawled headlong with a certain grace.

She gave a chuckle. 'I'll bet you're doing that all the time. Too long by half and then a bit, that scarf of yours.'

'On the contrary, Mrs Moggins,' he said, swiftly regaining his feet. 'My scarf and I live in perfect accord and mishaps are extremely rare.' He resumed his upward progress. 'I will, however, watch my step from now on.'

'Did you knit that thing yourself?' asked Mrs Moggins, keeping a safe distance from the flailing hem as she trudged up the stairs.

'No. It was the work of Madame Nostradamus. And, believe me, this particular scarf is more than it appears to be.'

'Isn't everything?'

'Indeed. Apart, of course, from those things that are less than they appear to be.'

'Well that goes without saying, don't it, sir?'

'If you say so. Now - where was I? Oh yes -

Madame Nostradamus... Delightful lady. She wanted to give me a gift for some small assistance I had rendered, and so she set to the task of knitting a scarf whose length, bands, colours and texture represented a set of correspondences based on an obscure branch of Cabalism. The act of knitting itself was executed according to a strict ritual laid out in the lost Apocryphon of Nemonides. After much toil, the splendid Madame Nostradamus finished the scarf just before dawn on the third night of the black moon, as prescribed in the apocryphon. Once completed, the woollen material enfolded a kind of miniature world of modulated colours and textures that was attuned to my individual psyche. In its own, quiet way, the scarf has provided a psychotronic aura of good luck around me in my various jaunts about the universe. It also responds to a sequence of sounds drawn from the Apocryphon of Nemonides - basically a string of Latin words uttered in a most unusual way.'

'Sounds bloody silly to me.'

'Urn... well, of course - it would. But don't forget that the absurdity principle is one of the fundamental constants of the cosmos.'

She narrowed her eyes. 'That's as may be, sir, but it won't put a pig's trotter on the dinner table come Eastertide, if you catch my drift.'

A faint *whuff-whiffle* sounded from somewhere up above. The Doctor's step hesitated a fraction, then resumed his ascent, just a little more slowly.

'As you might say, Mrs Moggins - that's as may be. But we'll reach the attic in a couple of minutes so perhaps we'd better concentrate on the matter in hand. For example, how did you know that the intruder wanted my scarf - I believe your precise words were 'he'll be after that piece of knitting."

She shrugged. 'Stands to reason. Like likes like, and there's no getting round it.'

He gave a quizzical look over his shoulder. 'Could you elaborate?'

'He was sort of made of string. Sort of. In a manner of speaking.'

'Yes?' he prompted. 'And...'

'You know - like string. All knitted-up, and sort of unravelled but not unravelled and running about and - well, you know the kind of thing. And like likes like so I'd look to yer doings, and that's the beginning and end of it.'

'Er...'

'Oh, you *know* - a sort of thingy with too many wotsits and not really like string at all but pretty much the same thing when you come down to it.'

The *whuff-whiffling* noise whispered down the stair again.

He drew to an abrupt halt. 'Let's go through this again, step by step.' He spun round. 'Now -'

Whuff-whiffle

In the act of turning, his foot caught well and truly in the scarf and he barely saved himself from a nasty fall by performing an extraordinary pirouette. Once his hand was securely on the railing, he lifted up the offending scarf and dangled it before his eyes. His expression betrayed nothing. 'I thought so. It's getting longer.'

Mrs Moggins squinted at the article in question. 'You're not just saying that because you feel a bit of a prat falling over it all the time?'

His mouth fell open and a hint of understanding glinted in his eyes. 'Of course! It must be something to do with -'

Whuff-whiffle

The scarf came alive.

Like a boa-constrictor sprayed with itching powder, it threshed and thrashed manically. One end looped itself around the Doctor's neck, and looped itself again, squeezing tight - and tighter. The Doctor's fingers scrabbled helplessly at the contracting noose, a pained gargle issuing from his throat. The rest of the scarf suddenly lengthened to a taut streak and shot upward, yanking its victim off his feet. He was launched up into the shadows in front of Mrs

Moggins's astonished gaze.

The sight of the nice gentleman disappearing into the upper gloom galvanised her into action. The suddenness of the attack - a few seconds from start to finish - had taken her unawares. But nobody - physical or metaphysical - got away with hanging any employer of hers, not while there were cleaning-lady muscles in her arms and a mop in her sturdy hands.

'You just hold on there, Mr Doctor!' she bellowed, charging up the stairs, mop at the ready. 'I'll give wotsisname what for, you see if I don't.'

Powerful legs pumping away, she spiralled up the stair at a prodigious rate, resolutely puffing her fag in the rapid climb. Her wits spun faster and faster as spiral after spiral unwound.

A fleeting minute and she burst into a spacious attic, crammed with dusty chests. Her mind still caught in the round-and-round-and-round of her ascent she wasted a few seconds still running in spirals before falling on her ample rump.

Shaking her head free of the twizzly things going on it she staggered to her feet and stared fiercely about her. The Doctor was nowhere in sight. But the sort-of-stringy thingamajig that she'd inadvertently let into the TARDIS was in plain view, buggering about in a corner of the room. It had a hat on - which was odd. The presence of headgear was, however, irrelevant.

An instinct made her glance up directly above the stringy wotsit. And she saw her employer, suspended from the throttling scarf, high in the rafters. By the look of him, he was starting to weaken.

Swift thought and action were called for.

Her thoughts like racing cars at a *Grand Prix,* she sped through the full list of her previous employers: Sigmund Freud - no, all she heard from him was a lot of funny talk about his mother... Mr Dudgeon, the mediaevalist - she'd got a few combat tips from him but unfortunately there was nothing resembling a broadsword, axe or mace ready to hand... Bucky Laredo, the ex-cowboy - no... Mister Fantastico the escapologist - hmm, no

Employer after employer flashed through her mind. Then she flashed past a face wearing *pince-nez*, put a mental foot on a metaphorical brake, and reversed a few spins of the wheels.

Mrs Trimmer. The gaunt spinster with the *pince-nez* and the wall-mounted animal trophies - and the ghastly woollen cardigans, some inextricably attached to each other by strangled skeins of wool. She had once knitted a jumper into the lap of her own dress. Mrs Trimmer, the worst knitter in

Highgate, possibly London, conceivably the Western Hemisphere.

Mrs Moggins looked at the ragamuffin strands of her mop head. 'Well, you never know until you try, as Mrs P. always says.'

She gripped the mop handle like a javelin, mop head aimed at the noose-scarf overhead. She propelled the mop with a mighty throw. It hurtled straight at the coiled wool.

And where it hit, at the noose around the Doctor's neck, it stuck, good and true.

The animated wool intruded its fibres into the tangled strands of the mop head as though trying to knit something knew of this unexpected arrival.

Her mouth spread in a broad grin. 'I thought so. Like likes like. Come to that, like likes something vaguely similar.'

The knitting action gathered rapid momentum and, as the scarf struggled to knit and re-knit, the busy fibres bustled and flexed and, inch by inch, loosened their stranglehold on the Doctor. Then the Doctor was plummeting to the floor. After a crash of feet on boards and much rising of dust, he reared up with a groggy motion, a hand massaging his throat. Incredibly, he still had his hat on.

Almost as incredibly, his voice was near normal after the savage strangulation. 'Well, Mrs Moggins, this is - as you would say - a turn up for the books.'

She frowned at the Doctor. 'You said that without moving your lips.'

'I didn't say it, Mrs Moggins,' the Doctor replied in a harsh gasp. 'It was the Hidden Pattern that spoke.' He flicked a finger at the wotsit in the corner.

Mrs Moggins turned her ireful eye on the string-thing with a hat on. Now that she had the time to observe fully, the hat was a brown fedora, identical to the Doctor's.

The whatchamacallit that was wearing the fedora had changed somewhat since it had barged past her into theTARDIS. It had acquired more substance, clearer definition. It had developed a distinctly woolly texture - and a familiar set of colours. It reminded her of -

'It's like your bleedin' scarf, Doctor,' she burst out. 'Except it's jumping about and got sort of arms and leg things and a hat on.'

'And speaks with a passable imitation of my voice,' the Doctor said. He gave a slight start as the mop landed directly in front of him.

Mrs Moggins seized the mop with aplomb and held it before her like a fearsome weapon, glad of the feel of it in her hands. The implement was an extension of herself, hand-made by her mother with infinite care, the most prized of her possessions.

'My animated scarf has given up on knitting the unknittable, I see,' the Doctor remarked with an upward glance.

She followed the Doctor's glance. 'Looks like it's trying to knit itself.'

'A temporary confusion which will soon pass. It won't be long before it attacks again.' He returned his full attention to the humanoid bundle of woolly fibres crowned with a fedora. 'This, Mrs Moggins, is the creation of one familiar with the more arcane aspects of Cabala and the lost Apocryphon of Nemonides. This, combined with its obvious animosity to me and the requisite sewing skill points to only one suspect.'

'As usual, Doctor, you show some insight into my plans. Full marks for a commendable effort.'

The mellifluous tones were markedly different from its vocal impersonation of the Doctor - and different again from the gruff voice she had heard outside the Unpainted Door, demanding admittance.

'I know that voice,' she said, slightly thunderstruck. 'You're - you're Mister Fantastico!'

'Otherwise known as the Master,' the Doctor said grimly. 'One of whose hobbies includes knitting, a skill at which he displays a notable expertise.'

'But you were my last employer!' she exclaimed, eye-balling the fibrous mass. Her manner softened. 'And, I must say, a very fine employer you were, sir. That apartment of yours above that Chinese laundry in Limehouse was spick and span as they come - hardly needed the touch of a duster. No work at all. And very generous with your purse you were too, sir.'

'And very ready with a recommendation for your next post too, Mrs Moggins,' it replied. 'A certain Doctor whose mobile abode was an transdimensionai police box.'

With a wink, she wagged her finger at the woollen wotsit and clucked her tongue. 'Ooo... You are a one, MisterFantastico, or the Master or whatever the dickens you call yourself. You fixed me up right and proper, slipping me into the Doctor's home, and no mistake. It was the doorknobs what did it, wasn't it?'

'It was, as you say, the doorknobs. With the remarkable muscularity of your arm, strengthened by years of house-cleaning, you have a certain facility for pulling off doorknobs in the occasional excess of zeal, usually when rattling a door to shoo off unwelcome callers...'

'All your callers were unwelcome, as I recall,' she murmured to herself.

'...There was a reasonable chance that my persistent rapping on one of the back doors would goad you into shaking the door with some force, thus dislodging the doorknob.'

'And temporarily reversing the polarity field of the door,' she said wryly with a resigned lift of the shoulders.

'Urn... well, if you like - something remotely along those lines, give or take a transdimensionai theorem or two.'

'That's as may be, sir, but when you come down to it you tried to kill the Doctor here, and that's where I draw the line. The Doctor's my employer, and a fine gent he is. I'm afraid I must ask you to leave, Mister Fantastico.'

'Much appreciated, Mrs Moggins,' the Doctor acknowledged with a nod. 'But may I point out a few salient facts? Firstly, this grotesque is not the Master, but merely his creation, a form of knitted puppet speaking with its master's voice. Secondly, the Terror Trumpet announced the intrusion of a nameless terror and the Master, for all his faults, is hardly that. Thirdly, the Hidden Pattern which he has introduced into the fabric of the TARDIS is likely to unravel us all.'

She looked askance. 'I can't see what's so bloody terrible about a spooky scarf with a hat on.'

'It's what it's capable of that's terrible, not its appearance. This is a image fashioned in mockery of myself by means of the ritual that Madame

Nostradamus employed in knitting my scarf. It has the potential to undo me utterly.'

Her mouth tightened. 'Alright, alright, I get the puppet idea and all that, but this thing doesn't look much of a nameless terror to me, and appearances count for something.'

'0, what tangled webs we weave,' chuckled the woollen grotesque. 'Let me spin you a yarn.'

'Here it comes,' the Doctor whispered softly.

A fibrous limb threw the hat off and sent it sailing across the attic.

Then the busy bundle of wool erupted into fresh, fleshly life. No longer woolly and fluffy, the mass blossomed red and raw, a clump of lashing veins and nerves, reaching out to flesh, nerve and bone.

'Let me spin you into my yarn!' boomed a voice of - nameless terror.

'Oh bugger...' moaned Mrs Moggins, the fag dropping from her lips. The penny had finally dropped. The Hidden Pattern, the Doctor had called it. It was about to knit them into itself, make them part of its bleedin' horrible pattern.

'At last you will be part of my designs, Doctor!' exulted the swelling mass of tendrils.

'Not just yet, I hope,' the Doctor responded as he gave a mighty leap and grabbed the end of his suspended scarf, pulling it free of whatever was holding it in thin air. The scarf began to stir but the Doctor launched into a litany of what sounded like Latin spoken forwards, backwards and sideways simultaneously.

Whatever the Doctor was up to, it seemed to be working. The scarf suddenly quietened in his grip. Then it started to stretch. It snaked out and wreathed sinuously, doubling in length each second. Loop by loop, it wrapped itself around the nameless Knitter, pinioning its blood-pulsing tubes and whipping nerves in ever-tighter coils.

Mrs Moggins heaved a hefty sigh. 'Well done, Doctor, for doing whatever it was that you did.'

'It was that string of Latin words from the Apocryphon of Nemonides that I mentioned earlier,' he said, carefully surveying the tethered monstrosity. 'It was a form of fail-safe woven into the scarf in the event of some being assuming possession of it. The litany restores control to me and unleashes an aspect of the scarf's arcane power.'

'A bit Madame Blavatsky, innit?' she remarked. 'Any road up, it worked.'

'For a while, yes. But sooner or later, this monstrosity will unravel and break free of its bonds.'

She rubbed her chin. 'Hmm... it tried to knit us into itself. Maybe the tables can be turned on it.' She raised up her mop like a spear, eyeing the mop head woven with infinite care by her mother's hands. A fine piece of work though it was, the strands had worn thin with time and toil. 'It could do with a bit of body to it. Time to weave a bit of domestic magic.'

Mrs Moggins thrust the mop head into the throbbing lump of the Knitter and, with the artistry of decades of mopping, screwed the strand just so - and so... catching the various veins and nerves, snagging them, tangling them all up...

'NO!' shrieked the Knitter as it realised what was happening. 'You can't knit me! Not with a mop head!'

She grinned. 'I've a feeling that's exactly what I'm doing, Mister Knitter. Like likes like, and it works just as well one way as another. Sort of reversing the polarity field, if you like.'

The Doctor gave her a bow. 'Mrs Moggins, I'm almost speechless with admiration, although, when the process is complete, I suspect you'll have a dangerous mop on your hands.'

She gave him a bit of a look. 'Listen Doctor, you may be the cat's whiskers when it comes to interdimensional wotsits and whosits, but my Mum's mop is as much a part of me as your TARDIS is of you. Whatever gets absorbed by my mop belongs to *me.'*

His spread his palms in acceptance. 'I don't doubt it, Mrs Moggins. Now - I must dash. Sarah will be wondering what the Terror Trumpet was all about.'

'So long, Doctor, and - don't forget...'

He gave an uncertain smile. 'Ah - forget what?'

She matched his smile with a scowl. 'My bleedin' wages!'

'Oh, count on it, Mrs Moggins,' he assured, beating a hasty retreat. 'Count on it.'

She watched his departure, then looked down at the swelling mop head and the shrinking bulk of the Knitter. A smile bent her lips.

'Coming along nicely.'

Mrs Moggins leaned back in the armchair and sipped a nice cup of tea. From her position, she had a clear view of the corridor - and the thick-headed mop that was busy cleaning it. The mop head whimpered from time to time, clearly sorry for itself.

'Well, that's life,' muttered Mrs Moggins. 'You gets what you give.'

It was a strange experience, watching her mop do all the work while she had her feet up. But she'd get used to it. Oh yes, she'd definitely get used to it.

Goodbye Rembrandt
By
David J Howe

ONE

Eight-year-old Danny Walker was pushed back against the muddy wall. He could feel his fists and arms sinking into the yielding grey ooze and yet it was impossible to run. Before him the walls of the underground tunnel curved round out of sight and a familiar quirky tune started up which could only mean one thing... the Mud People were coming.

Before Danny's frightened eyes the walls of the tunnel seemed to shift as featureless grey mud gave way to humanoid forms. These forms started to struggle and push themselves away from the walls of the passage, their lumpy misshapen faces and hands reaching for Danny. As the music continued, Danny watched as they lurched away down the tunnel in search of Danny's hero, one Flash Gordon, who was on Mars to try and foil the schemes of the dastardly Ming the Merciless.

Danny risked a sideways glance but the seat next to him was empty. His elder brother had no doubt slipped away to enjoy some time with his new girlfriend Tanya. Bob was eight years older than

Danny and had just discovered the wonders of girls: Danny however could not understand why *anyone* would want to spend time with them. They couldn't throw ball properly, were hopeless at football, and, unless properly prepared by forward thinking mothers, couldn't even go climbing trees and exploring the riverbanks nearby for fear of getting their dresses spoiled.

Danny sighed and looked back at the large cinema screen in front of him. The mud men had been replaced by Gordon's rocketship, shooting through space and emitting an impressively large number of sparks from its rear end. Danny had seen Star Wars and knew that rocket ships did not throw out sparks. Real rockets made a kind of howling noise as they powered through space, lasers blazing away at the enemy. Danny briefly entertained the thought that in a battle between Flash Gordon and Darth Vader, then Vader was almost certain to win... but if Lord Vader then decided to go up against Ming, the outcome was perhaps less certain.

As Gordon's ship hurtled towards the surface of Mars, a familiar caption appeared telling people that the adventure would continue next time. As the music swelled and the credits appeared, Danny pushed himself up out of his seat. He noted that the scuffed fabric was very like mud and experimentally pushed it with his finger. The resultant dent stayed when he removed his finger. Danny pushed at another point with the same result.

A sharp pang in his bladder told him that he had not been to the loo since the start of the presentation and that, if he didn't want to miss the next feature - an episode featuring Captain Buck Rogers - he had better do something about it.

Danny crab-walked his way down the row of seats to the aisle and, stepping over someone who had apparently gone to sleep on the stairs, made his way up towards the back of the cinema towards the toilets. All around him children were laughing, screaming, shouting and calling to each other. Paper missiles flew about, and every so often a lump of indefinable toffee-like substance was thrown. The management had long since abandoned any hope of controlling the 50 or so kids who had made the Saturday morning pictures such a success during the school holidays. It was easier to simply spend an hour or so after they had all gone cleaning up, than suffer the constant abuse and harassment that ensued should any of them appear in the cinema during the two-hour session.

Danny reached the back of the cinema and turned to survey the seats leading to the screen. The cinema was an old, turn-of-the-century construction and the screen was massive, dwarfing all before it. The seating was all on the cinema's balcony, and at the very front there was a massive pit falling away to where the stalls would have originally been. They had long been removed, however, and the whole 'downstairs' area had been converted into two other cinemas, allowing the management to show three films at the same time and so treble their income.

Access to this dark front area was blocked off by gratings across the spiral staircases at each side of the auditorium, and a wall prevented any children from risking life and limb by falling over the edge. This was the only thing that was forbidden, as far as Danny could tell. The management were blissfully absent at all times, except for when someone decided to clamber up on the wall. Then, torches blazing, the manager and two female ushers (one, Mavis, was usually to be found behind the cash desk dispensing tickets, while the other, Susie, was in charge of the ice cream fridge and the coke and popcorn machines) would appear as if from nowhere and escort said child off to await his or her parents.

It wasn't worth the hassle, so most of the kids stayed on their side of the wall.

Danny carefully scanned the rows of seats but he couldn't see Bob and Tanya anywhere. They normally nipped to the back row but today that row was empty. Danny shrugged. Maybe they had gone to the loo themselves. He pushed aside the heavy red velvet curtain that blocked the rear exit and wandered along the corridor to the loos. All along the walls were hung frames containing faded posters for old films. Danny had seen the posters hundreds of times, but had yet to see any of the films. One, for something called *Them,* was a particular favourite and Danny liked to stop and study the images, imagining what marvels the film must contain. Today, however, he hurried on past, mindful of his need to use the loo, and slightly concerned as to where his brother had gone.

He pushed open the door to the gents and hurried to the porcelain urinal. When he had finished, he dutifully washed his hands. Then he realised that Bob was not in there. In fact, the toilet was completely empty. Danny stood still for a moment and listened. All he could hear was the dripping of the cistern.

He returned to the door and entered the corridor once more, not seeing the shadows that skittered across the floor of the toilets behind him.

Odd. The silence continued. Normally you could hear the screams and shouts from the auditorium back here as the old velvet curtain was not that good at blocking them out, but as Danny listened he could hear nothing at all.

He wandered back along the corridor, past the posters, and paused at the curtain. He still could hear nothing. Behind him, the darkness seemed to intensify, and the posters along the walls shimmered slightly, the images faintly moving as though seen through a haze of heat. He grasped the curtain and pushed it to one side, slipping past it into the cinema once more.

Danny stood and looked around. There was no-one there. No-one at all. The cinema was deserted.

TWO

Tanya saw Danny make his way up the aisle towards the back of the cinema. She and Bob were shrouded in darkness about three rows from the back, below the wall lamp that Bob had disabled some weeks back by removing the bulb and then jamming a wad of chewing gum into the hole before squashing the bulb back into place. This resulted in an impressive area of gloom to which she and Bob made their way once the films had started.

Tanya closed her eyes in pleasure as Bob started kissing and running his sharp teeth along her neck. Goosebumps rose on her bare arms as he ran his hand around the back of her neck and tickled the fine hairs there. She shifted in her seat and moaned. Bob was certainly keen and at this rate she'd be keen as well.

Bob's other hand braced against the seatback as he started to suck at her earlobe, at the same time blowing gently into her ear. The sensation of air blowing against the dampness of her ear sent shivers running right down her legs and she curled her feet in pleasure.

Through her closed eyelids she suddenly caught a flash of light and opened her eyes to see what was going on. The flickering grew faster and she struggled to push Bob off her.

'Bob... stop... look.'

Bob raised his head lazily from her neck and smiled. 'D'you really want me to stop?' As his hand started a slow stroke up her side towards her breasts, she gasped. 'Yes... No... Just stop!'

Bob opened his eyes and looked at her. Tanya was looking right past him at whatever was causing the light to strobe across her face. He twisted in his seat and looked towards the front of the auditorium.

All the noise had stopped and everyone in the cinema was looking towards the source of the light.

The giant screen was flickering and strobing, coloured lights flashing out and playing over the faces of the people gathered before it. Within the light Bob could see something curling and moving. A sinuous shape that coiled and writhed in the light. He sat up and peered closer. It was like one of those magic-eye pictures which came to life before your eyes when you least expected it. But there was something oily and wrong with this picture.

As Bob watched, a sudden tendril of mauve light flicked from the screen and silently engulfed a group of children near the front. There was a burst of light as though someone were taking flash-photographs in the cinema, and then the children were gone. Just vanished.

Bob grabbed Tanya by the hand and tried to drag her from her seat.

'There's something not right here. Tanya. Come on. We've got to...'

She seemed strangely reluctant to leave the seat and sat there, wide eyed, staring at the lights which strobed and flickered across her face.

Bob grabbed her arm and lifted her from the seat. 'Come on!' he shouted and started dragging her along the row of seats. She followed him meekly, still entranced by the light show taking place at the front of the cinema. Reaching the aisle, Bob started to make his way up the steps towards the exit. He looked back to see another tendril flick out and caress his girlfriend's face briefly.

Tanya stiffened and shuddered before the sight of her was blotted from Bob's eyes by another brilliant flash. He lifted his hands to his face and blinked until he was able to see again. Tanya had gone. In fact, practically everyone in the cinema had vanished, leaving an eerie stillness lit by jumping shadows and strobing lights. Bob turned and bounded up the stairs towards the velvet curtain that led to the exit.

Just as he reached the curtain, he felt a tingling in his leg. He looked down to see purple light flickering around him, and then, with an agonising jolt, everything went black.

THREE

The Doctor was worried. Normally this would not have bothered Romana much, but his worry made him grumpy and uncommunicative. Ever since they had attached the randomiser to the TARDIS controls, he seemed to have grown more moody. She would have thought that he would have relished the prospect of unplanned and unannounced adventures through Space and Time once more (apparently he had enjoyed a good few of those in the years before she met him) but instead he seemed more concerned with whether their random trips were, indeed, random at all.

First they had arrived on the planet Skaro. Nothing too unusual about that, but their arrival had coincided with a plot by the robot Movellans to excavate the body of Davros, the creator of the

Daleks, in order to use his knowledge as a lever in their war against his creations. From there they had tried to have a holiday in France; Paris to be precise, but somehow theTARDIS again arrived right on top of a time distortion caused by an alien experimenting in the vicinity.

After that, he had made some adjustments to the randomiser, and the TARDIS had homed in on yet another source of time distortion. Again on Earth, and again she and the Doctor had gone out to investigate.

Now, here they were again. Once more on Earth (what was it with this planet, she wondered. Why was it the focus for so much alien attention?) and once more checking out some anomalous ripples in time.

Romana had to admit, however, that this time the ripples had flared across the TARDIS' navigation systems like a lighted strip of magnesium. There was no denying it, and no ignoring it either, as the Doctor adjusted the controls minutely and brought the TARDIS down to Earth. .

Standing by the doors to an enormous cinema in twentieth century England, the Doctor was an imposing sight, and yet at the same time friendly and calming. A pair of wide, twinkling blue eyes peered from under a shock of curly brown hair. His full lips were parted in an almost permanent gentle smile, and atop the head a battered felt hat rested at a jaunty angle.

'Localised disturbance of the time lines,' he muttered to himself. 'Whatever is going on is still going on, so to speak.' As he spoke he waved an object in his hand at the doors before checking a small dial set into its face.

As usual, Romana had dressed for the occasion and was wearing a tight pair of black corduroy trousers and a short scarlet blazer over a white, collared shirt. Unlike the Doctor, she liked to look her best when investigating unexplained time disturbances.

She looked around her. The Rembrandt cinema was perched on a hill alongside a railway line and below it a stream of traffic passed in both directions on a busy South London road. She turned to see that the Doctor had opened the doors to the cinema and was striding across the red-carpeted foyer towards a flight of stairs that led to the upper level.

'It's stronger here, see?' The Doctor called out to Romana.

She hurried across and looked at the time sensor he was carrying. A handy device, and one which he had knocked up in the TARDIS labs once he had decided that he was going to seek out these anomalies. Romana idly wondered whether the Guardians' intent in setting up the search for the Key to Time had not been a ruse to draw the Doctor into enjoying the thrill of the hunt, and that this was the result...

'Oh, Doctor,' she exclaimed in mock exasperation. 'There's nothing here! It's just a cinema. England, London, late 20th century...' again she added under her breath. 'If there were some distortion then it would be showing itself.'

As she spoke she took a step backwards up the steps leading to the upper level and felt a cold chill down her back. Before her, the foyer seemed to ripple and twist.

She jumped forward abruptly and looked back up the stairs. 'What was that?'

'What was what?' asked her companion, innocently munching at the contents of a carton of popcorn he had found on the sales counter.

Romana reached out her hand up the stairs, and saw her fingers ripple before her. 'The time distortion. It's here,' she whispered.

The Doctor strode over and reached out with his hand too. 'Mmmrn,' he murmured around a mouthful of popcorn. 'Hold this.' He thrust the box of corn into Romana's hands and held forward the time sensor. The small needle started to shudder back and forth.

'About twenty-five... give or take. And fading.' He stepped up the stairs, still holding the device in front of him. 'Fading... fading... gone.' He looked back at Romana. 'Whatever it was, it's retreated upstairs.' The Doctor looked up into the darkness. 'Shall we follow it?'

Without another word he started stalking up the staircase, leaving Romana standing down in the foyer.

'You wait there...' the Doctor's voice came echoing down the staircase.

Romana gulped. 'It'll be all right. The Doctor knows what he's doing,' she muttered to herself. With the fingers of her left hand crossed behind her back, she added: 'I hope.'

FOUR

The Doctor could feel that something was very wrong in this cinema. The portable time sensor was registering wildly and, as a Time Lord, he didn't need his electronics to tell him that time was being manipulated here.

As he ascended the dark staircase, he thought he could hear snatches of music and voices, as though he was tuning a radio through various stations. He stopped just before the top of the stairs and listened hard. As though from a great distance he could hear the distinctive twanging music that heralded the start of Orson Wells' film *The Third Man.* He took another step forward and the music dissolved into an out of tune- rendition of John Williams' *Star Wars* theme. One more step and he was at the top of the stairs. From nowhere he heard Jack Nicholson announce his arrival: 'Here's Johnny!'

The Doctor slowly walked forward, with each step he caught more snatches of music and dialogue: 'What's up Doc?'; music from *Twin Peaks*; Woody

Woodpecker making his distinctive call; 'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn!'; the whistling theme from *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly...* all mixed and merged together to form a whispering accompaniment to his steps.

He approached the velvet curtain that led to the seating area and paused for a moment with his hand on the rich, red cloth. Mixed in with the whispering and snatches of music he could now hear crying and screaming. Children reacting in pain and confusion. From around the curtain could be seen a flickering, multi-coloured light which pulsed in time with the fading of the sounds.

He swept the curtain aside and revealed the blackness of the auditorium. All the sounds stopped and the lights were extinguished. Breathing heavily, the Doctor took a step into the room beyond.

He peered into the darkness and fumbled in one of his voluminous pockets for a torch. He located what he was after and switched it on. The narrow beam cut through the darkness and illuminated the ghostly shape of the vast cinema screen before him. Swinging the light up the rows of seats, the Doctor thought he could hear sobbing once more. He made his way slowly across in front of the screen and up the central aisle, his feet crunching on discarded popcorn.

A furtive movement at the back of the auditorium caught his eye and he swung his torch up. He carefully made his way up the wide steps. Right at the top, huddled behind the seats, he found a small boy curled into a ball. The boy was crying and when the Doctor reached out his hand to gently shake his shoulder, he squealed and tried to scurry away along the row of seats.

'Hello there,' smiled the Doctor, gently.

The boy stopped and looked back at the Doctor, terror glinting in his eyes.

The Doctor gently removed his hat and smiled at the boy again. 'Hello. I don't think we've been introduced. I'm the Doctor. I'm a friend...'

The boy made another muffled cry and launched himself at the Doctor. Burying his face in the folds of his voluminous scarf, he started sobbing more loudly.

The Doctor hugged the child to him and patted his heaving shoulders. 'It's all right...' he muttered, looking around the gloom warily. 'It's all right.'

FIVE

Romana was starting to wonder what was taking so long. There seemed to be nothing out of place. Nothing unusual whatsoever. Her gaze took in the doors they had just come from - now closed. The popcorn machine, the ticket booth, the red carpet...

everything *seemed* normal.

She sighed and lithely jumped up onto the counter beside the coke machine, her legs swinging in front of her.

...trouble... go now...

She shook her head. She could have sworn she had heard something. Like a background buzz in her mind.

...help... now... urgent...

There it was again.

'Doctor?' She called out quietly. 'Doctor, is that you?'

Silence.

She pushed herself off the counter and loped across to the flight of stairs. Peering up she could see nothing.

She took a tentative step up and her attention was suddenly grasped by a framed poster on the wall opposite her. It was for a film called *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and showed the leading character, an unsavoury character called 'Leatherface', wielding a large chainsaw against a blood-red sky.

Romana blinked. The poster had seemed to shift and move and suddenly the crashing roar of a chainsaw being revved up echoed around. With a sickening twisting and wrenching feeling, Romana felt the world tip sideways and suddenly, rather than standing on a flight of stairs in an English cinema, she was lying on a hot tarmac road. The sun was setting behind her, casting a blood-red glow over everything and, in front of her, revving his chainsaw, stood Leatherface.

She blinked rapidly and clutched at the gritty tarmac. It was real...

Romana's eyes widened in horror as the man with a mask of human skin took a step towards her.

SIX

The Doctor had managed to calm the boy down and as his sobs had died away, he sat him down in one of the seats.

The Doctor crouched down beside him. 'I know it's hard,' he began, 'but you've got to tell me what happened here.'

The boy looked at the Doctor and shook his head stubbornly.

The Doctor looked thoughtful. 'If you do, you can have a jelly baby...' In the Doctor's hand had miraculously appeared a crumpled white bag. He dug into it with his other hand and emerged triumphantly with a green baby-shaped sweet. 'There!'

He thrust the bag at the boy. 'Go on... before I eat them all.'

The boy looked uncertain, but the Doctor rustled the bag at him again. 'Go on,' he whispered.

The boy delved into the bag himself and came out with a black sweet that he popped into his mouth.

The Doctor smiled. 'There you go. Now. How about we start from the beginning?' He cleared his throat and held out his hand. 'I'm the Doctor and I'm pleased to meet you...?'

'Danny,' whispered the boy around the half-chewed jelly baby. 'Danny Walker.'

'Well I'm pleased to meet you Danny Walker,' said the Doctor, grasping the boy's hand and squeezing it. 'Now... can you tell me what you saw?'

The boy pulled his hand from the Doctor's and shook his head.

'Now... come on Danny. I haven't got enough sweets to keep this up all day, you know. Nothing's going to hurt you... I just need to know what you saw. Hmm? Were you here on your own?'

Danny shook his head. 'My brother... and Tanya...'

The Doctor looked around. 'Do you know where they are now?'

'Gone.'

'Gone? Gone where?'

'Just gone.'

The Doctor sighed and stood up. He flicked on his torch once more and shone it around the room.

'Gone.' He muttered to himself.

'Come on Danny.' The Doctor held out his hand to the boy. 'Let's get you back downstairs, eh? And then we'll see if we can't find out where your brother went to.'

Danny looked up at the Doctor and managed a smile. 'Okay.'

'That's the spirit!'

They made their way back down the centre aisle and across to the staircase leading back down to the foyer. As they made their way down the steps, the Doctor noticed that something wasn't right. Where was Romana? He bounded down the last few steps'

'Romana? Romana? Where are you?' The Doctor stood in the middle of the foyer and listened. Faintly, he could hear the sound of someone trimming a hedge in the distance. And screaming.

The Doctor shut his eyes and slowly pirouetted on the spot. He came to a halt facing the staircase once more, on which Danny was still standing with a scared expression on his face. The Doctor opened his eyes, and walked back towards the boy.

'Oh dear.' The Doctor's eyes alighted on the poster of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre,* where the maniac with the chainsaw was bending over a female figure on the ground before him. The figure had long blonde hair and was wearing black jeans and a red jacket. 'Romana!' hissed the Doctor.

SEVEN

Romana!

Romana heard the Doctor hiss her name. Even above the overpowering roar of the chainsaw, she heard it as though it were in her head.

'Doctor?' she spluttered. 'Help me!'

Romana. It's not real. You're not really there. Concentrate.

The Doctor's words seemed to make no sense. She could feel the hard tarmac under her hands, hear the roar of the ripping chainsaw, smell the belch of petrol fumes each time the lunatic revved it up. Of course she was here...

Keep thinking... It's not real... you're not really there.

Romana glanced around her. How could she do that? The maniac stepped closer and swung the spinning blade in a lazy arc towards her. She tried to scurry away but the lunatic could walk faster than she could crawl. She fought back the impulse to scream again.

Romana. Listen to me.

It was the Doctor again. She struggled to concentrate through her fear. She dragged herself a little further away from the man across the gritty road surface.

Shut your eyes. It's not real!

'Shut your eyes!' she muttered. 'It's all right for you. You don't have a bloody great chainsaw being waved in your face!'

She clenched her hands into fists and with a momentous effort of willpower closed her eyes. The chainsaw roared once more and she felt a breeze as, presumably, the man made another swinging pass before her face.

Say It. It's not real.

'It's not real,' agreed Romana. 'It's not real.'

Again.

'It's not real... it's not real... it's not real.'

Suddenly the sound cut off, and Romana felt herself twisting again. The hard, gritty road surface softened, and she unclenched her fists to feel the velvet pile of a carpet under her. She opened her eyes a crack to see the Doctor's face looking concerned.

'Oh, Doctor,' Romana gingerly got to her feet and dusted herself down. She could still smell the acrid tang of burnt petrol in her throat. 'What was that all about?'

'I was about to ask you the same question. Where were you... correction... where did you *think* you were?'.

Romana glanced at the film poster on the wall. 'In there... with that... that maniac. He was going to kill me.'

The Doctor looked at Romana and then at the poster. 'Really? Kill you? Are you sure?'

Romana nodded. 'It all seemed so real.'

'I expect it was meant to.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean,' said the Doctor grimly, 'that whatever, or whoever has taken control of this cinema intended it to seem real. There's something very evil here. Something that has been here for a long time. Something which has just managed to break through and which, if left unchecked, may destabilise the very fabric of time.'

'You don't mean...'

The Doctor suddenly brightened. 'No I don't mean... and neither do you.'

He looked at Danny who was still standing on the stairs beside him looking bemused. 'Danny, this is my friendRomana. Say "Hello" to Danny, Romana.'

Romana smiled at the boy. 'Hello Danny.'

Danny looked back at this lady and thought she had the most beautiful smile he had ever seen. He could not help but smile back.

The Doctor stepped towards Romana. 'Danny's had a bit of a shock. Maybe if you talk to him, you can find out what happened.'

Romana nodded and held out her hand to Danny. 'Come on Danny, I think there's still some coke in the machine. Shall we?'

Danny nodded, still entranced by Romana's smile. He took her hand and the two of them walked down the stairs towards the confectionery counter.

EIGHT

Down in the pit in front of the cinema screen, something stirred. Gently at first but then with more vigour. A gentle, pale violet glow coalesced into a shifting form, and air stirred as dust motes gathered together to create a shape. The light flickered in intensity and the shape of a skeletal arm formed from the dust. Slowly, the arm was coated with veins and muscle, before a layer of skin crept across it. The arm tentatively flexed.

Around the cinema auditorium, the numerous posters from times past glowed with an inner light. In each of them could be found figures which had not been there previously. In one, the bestial form of a Morlock was throwing its shadow over the forms of the peaceful Eloi, but among their number could be seen a number of children dressed, not in the cloth and flowers of those future inhabitants of the Earth as seen in George Pal's *The Time Machine,* but in jeans, sneakers and T-shirts of the late twentieth century. These children were screaming and screaming as the Morlocks approached ever closer.

In another, the image of Michael Caine standing proudly as his British troops rallied against the ruthless Zulu warriors was at odds with the group of strangely dressed teenagers who were being threatened by three spear-wielding aggressors. As the terrifying Zulus advanced, one of the teenagers, a girl, started crying uncontrollably, while the two boys stood their ground, terrified beyond belief as to what was happening to them.

In yet another, a space-suited alien being from Planet X stood over an attractive brunette, while in the background another woman looked on as a further group of children were being bundled into an alien spacecraft. Once more, all were confused, crying and terrified out of their wits.

In a poster for *The Brides of Fu-Manchu,* the collage of scenes behind the green- hued image of Christopher Lee as the dastardly Chinese villain now included Tanya and Bob, huddled together in a cell, awaiting whatever fate lay in store for them. Tanya was crying and Bob had his arm around her, unsure of what had happened or what to do or say.

All this pain and emotion fed the entity which writhed and rolled below the screen. Sucking up all the projected emotion that this building had known throughout the years, and intensified first through the capture of the children, and then through Romana's own terror at finding herself trapped, the entity now had enough latent energy to form itself a real body, something which would serve until it could gain sufficient suffering to expand once more.

The muted cries and screams from the posters fed it, making it grow and giving it life.

NINE

Down in the foyer, the Doctor and Romana had left Danny eating popcorn on the counter, and were standing over by the doors.

The Doctor pushed against the door once more. 'Definitely locked.'

'But how can it be locked?' asked Romana. 'We got in here and it was unlocked then.'

'Well, you can try yourself, but it's locked now.' The Doctor sighed. 'It's not as if we really know what's going on. Where all those children have vanished to.' He pulled his time sensor out of his pocket and checked the readings once more. 'Whatever it is,' he said, 'it's growing in strength.'

He showed the sensor to Romana, who was looking over his shoulder at the stairs. She gently shook her head and patted the Doctor's arm.

'I... I don't think we have to go looking for what's causing this, Doctor.' She swallowed. 'I think it's found us instead.'

The Doctor muttered 'What?' and slowly spun round on the spot.

At the top of the staircase, swathed in shadow, was an abomination.

It took a step down towards them. On top of a misshapen torso was a lumpy and malformed head. Wisps of hair dotted the skull, and the features kept shifting and moving, flowing like mercury into new formations. Now it looked like Humphrey Bogart, but those features shifted into Madonna, and from there into Mel Gibson, Meryl Streep, Peter Cushing and Roddy McDowell. No face remained for more than a few seconds before it shifted. A constant moving panoply of film stars through the ages.

The torso was red and unfinished, one stumpy arm emerged from the left side, while on the other grew a strong and muscular limb. A second set of limbs could be seen waving ineffectually below these. The legs were functional and ended with two stumps as though the creature wasn't sure what happened below the knee. Romana realised in horror that the majority of films mostly cut the actors off below the knees - it was rare to see feet on screen. This creature, whatever it was, had a million faces to choose from, but very little idea about the rest of the human body. Or else, pondered Romana cynically, it just couldn't be bothered.

As it stepped down closer to them, Romana left the Doctor's side and hurried across the foyer to where Danny had not as yet noticed their visitor. She grabbed his hand and pulled him off the counter and away to the far end of the foyer, where they crouched down behind the ticket booth.

'What is it?' asked Danny, again happy to have this beautiful lady all to himself.

'Nothing. It's nothing,' said Romana. She looked at Danny sternly. 'Now I want you to stay here. Alright? Just stay here and everything will be fine. Nothing will hurt you. We'll make sure of it.'

Danny looked up at her with trusting eyes. If his new friend said that if he stayed here, then he'd be fine, then he believed her. 'Okay,' he said, 'but you'll come back?'

Romana nodded. 'Yes. Promise.'

Danny settled back to munch at his popcorn, and Romana stood up and made her way back around the ticket booth to where she could see the Doctor standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at the hulking creature that was now about half way down. As Romana watched, she could see strands of violet light attaching the creature to the posters along the staircase wall. It seemed to be drawing energy from the images.

Romana hurried across the foyer and arrived at the

Doctor's side. 'You've noticed the light?' she hissed.

'Yes,' replied the Doctor, not taking his eyes off the thing in front of him. 'It seems to be drawing energy from them. You can see that as it gets close to a poster, the light flares brightly, and then fades off as it moves away.'

'What do you think it's doing? What's it taking from the posters?'

'Energy... emotion...' the Doctor's voice was bleak. 'A creature bringing itself into life using the emotions of people who come to watch films at the cinema. Interesting analogy. Filmmakers constantly try to outdo each other in creating ever more real spectacles on the screen, and to engage the viewers' emotions while doing so. Now those emotions have taken on a life of their own, so to speak.'

'But what about the children?'

The Doctor gestured to the posters. 'They're in there. Trapped. At least for the moment. Trapped in a world of make-believe. I think that our new friend here,' the Doctor gestured to the creature on the stairs, 'has put them all somewhere to generate the maximum amount of terror to feed it. And you know what that's like, don't you?'

Romana nodded. 'Horrible,' she whispered.

'So,' said the Doctor. 'Let's see what we can do about it.'

He took a step towards the hulking shape. The head twisted from side to side, like a snake seeking its prey. The ever-changing faces became quizzical, and then the thing's mouth opened in a smile.

'Of all the bars...' the voice of a thousand people hissed around the foyer.

'Oh, give it a rest!' exclaimed the Doctor. 'You've got all the films ever made, and all the actors. I'm sure you can come up with something more original than that!'

'Where are you going, little girl?'

Romana elbowed the Doctor. *'The Wizard of Ozi'*

The Doctor nodded. 'Our friend here may look like every child's nightmare, but it's not very original.' He looked at the creature. 'That's your problem, you see. You've access to time displacement, you can tap into all the things that exist on the silver screen, but you can't be original.'

The creature took another step towards them, and the head whipped round to fix the Doctor with a steely gaze. Through a million different voices, it tried again.

'You... mock... us... We... can... talk... through... the... voices... of... many.'

'Clever.' The Doctor nodded sagely. 'It's breaking the speech up into individual words and then playing them back to us one word at a time to give it a voice... What do you want?'

The Doctor flinched backwards as the questing head flicked back in his direction once more.

'We... want... experience... recorded... histories... not... enough.'

The creature swayed from side to side. As it breathed, so more violet flashes of light came from the posters, and the faint, echoing sound of screaming increased in volume slightly, before fading away once more.

It reached out its good arm towards the Doctor.

'You... who... are... you... you... are... not... like... the... others... more... like... one... we... tasted... fear... from... earlier.'

The Doctor shrugged modestly. 'Oh, we're just travellers, you know. Been there, done that, seen the other.' He smiled at the creature on the steps. 'You can't win, you know. We won't let you.'

Laughter echoed round the foyer. It was the laughter of a million people in a million cinemas at a million films. 'You... threaten... us?' the creature asked. 'We... can... draw... on... the... power... of... film... any... time... we... like.'

'But that's just it. It's only film. You can't experience true life. You can't enjoy what it means to grow up, to love, to hate, to bleed, to cry...'

'All... these... things... we... know.'

'Ah,' the Doctor shook his tousled head sagely. 'But you don't. You only know what the films have showed. A Hollywood-glossed version of what some group of faceless studio executives think it means to do those things. You're just a third rate copy of some fourth rate film ideas. There's not a spark of originality in you.'

The creature surged forward another step, and the Doctor and Romana stepped back.

Romana caught at the Doctor's sleeve. 'Careful, Doctor,' she said. 'Maybe it only has second-hand sensitivity as well.'

The Doctor looked at Romana. 'I've an idea,' he said. 'But you're not going to like it.'

'What idea?' Romana looked concerned.

'You're really not going to like it.'

'Well how can I tell, if you don't explain it to me.' Romana was getting used to the Doctor's word games, but this was hardly the time or the place.

The Doctor looked back at the creature on the stairs. 'Well... what our friend there wants is to experience a real life rather than a fiction.'

Romana nodded. 'I'm with you so far...'

'...so what we could perhaps do is give it what it wants.'

Romana frowned. 'What...?' She followed the

Doctor's gaze to the ticket booth where Danny was still hiding.

Romana's eyes flashed. 'No. How could you even think...? But the boy... he's just a child.'

The Doctor looked sad. 'I know. But what's done is done. You and I know, Romana, that we can't change the course of events. And sometimes we must live with the consequences.'

The Doctor turned back to the multi-faced creature. 'How much power do you have? How long can you last?'

'We... have... a... million... audiences... to... draw... from... nothing... can... stop... us.'

'Yes, yes, yes. I know all that. But what would you say if I could offer you what you want? What you need? To experience a life?'

The creature paused. 'You... have... the... power... to... make... this... offer...?'

The Doctor smiled. 'Well, it's not really a power, so much as the ability, and anyway I think you need to move on. You need to find out the truth,' he grinned. 'It is out there, you know.'

'Explain.'

The Doctor took a breath and, out of the corner of his eye, saw that Romana had edged back to the ticket booth. 'It's simple,' he said. 'You release all these people you have trapped and I will let you have a single life. One that has a lifetime of potential ahead of it. This act will subvert the laws of time itself, and will allow you to live forever.' The Doctor cocked his head. 'After a fashion,' he added under his breath.

The creature paused as though thinking. The legion of faces flickering across its head also seemed more thoughtful. Eventually, it spoke again. 'If... you... can... do... this... we... agree...'

The Doctor nodded. 'So, you return to where you came from and release the other people.'

'It... is... agreed.'

The creature clumsily turned and stomped back up the steps into the darkness.

TEN

'Romana! I think we've done it... Romana...?'

'Go away!'

'Romana... we've got to talk. It was the only way.'

She rounded on him. 'The only way! THE ONLY WAY! You want to send an innocent child to... to... that monstrosity, and you expect me to understand.' Romana's eyes blazed with anger. 'What gives you the right, eh? Who put you in charge? You play with peoples lives as though... as though they were pieces on a chess board.' She strode across the foyer towards him. 'Sacrifice a pawn here, a bishop there... it's all a game to you, isn't it? We could have found another way! We *should* have found another way! But, oh no, you have to start playing with people's lives. You have to make deals that cost so much!'

The Doctor nodded. 'There's always a cost, Romana. Always something to pay. We can't always negotiate the best deal, but we try... We *always* try.'

'So, go on then. What's your excuse this time? What great master-plan-in-progress is this move a part of?'

The Doctor's face broke into a broad grin. 'I had to make it think I was being serious. Your reactions just established that I was.'

Romana looked confused. 'What?'

The Doctor stepped towards her. 'You don't really believe that for one moment... for one moment... I would let Danny there walk into the lion's den unprotected?'

'Well... I...'

'Oh, Romana...'

'Well what did you

expect?' Romana sniffed. 'So you're not going to sacrifice Danny.'

The Doctor shook his head.

'You never were going to do that?'

The Doctor shook his head again.

'So.' Romana walked to the foot of the stairs and stood looking up. 'What do we do then? Mr Movies is up there waiting...'

The Doctor ignored her and wandered over to the ticket booth. 'Danny?'

Danny's head popped up and the boy smiled.

The Doctor gestured to the boy. 'You can come out now, Danny.'

'Is it safe?'

The Doctor nodded. 'For the moment.'

Danny emerged and the Doctor hunkered down on his haunches to talk to him. 'We're going to have to be very brave now, Danny. We've got to go and find your brother and his friend, and to try and stop them being frightened too. We've got to find as many of the people who were here as possible, and, if we can make them not be frightened, then we can all get out of here.'

Danny nodded. 'It's all just films, isn't it. Like on the screen. Nothing can hurt you if you just close your eyes.' Danny leaned closer to the Doctor, and whispered conspiratorially, 'My dad... my dad says that when he was young, he used to hide behind the sofa when things got too scary on the television.'

The Doctor smiled and nodded sagely. 'I've seen shows like that,' he said. 'They can be very scary.'

'But they can't hurt you,' said Danny with finality.

'Right.' The Doctor looked over at Romana, who was watching this exchange with a smile on her lips. He turned back to Danny. 'My friend there... Romana... she gets a little bit frightened at times. But it's all right. Do you think you can help her not to be afraid?'

Danny looked at the beautiful woman and smiled. He nodded and walked across to where Romana was standing. 'The Doctor says I'm to look after you,' he said.

Romana took his hand. 'Well, that's very kind. Thank you.'

'Right,' said the Doctor, picking his battered hat off his head and then jamming it back on his curls so that it rested at a jaunty angle. 'Ready?'

Romana and Danny looked at each other and then at the Doctor. 'Ready.[1] They both said together.

ELEVEN

In the main auditorium, all was quiet. The Doctor, Romana and Danny edged their way past the velvet curtain and along the front row of seats. The screen was glowing slightly, and down in the pit shadows stirred and roiled.

'I was looking at the posters,' hissed Romana.

The Doctor nodded. 'Not all of them have been used,' he whispered back. 'Obviously our friend has only used those that will elicit the most emotion.'

The Doctor clicked on his flashlight and swung it round the empty seats. 'Where... I wonder where?'

'Where what?' Danny was getting over his initial apprehension and, with his newfound role as Romana's protector, he felt that maybe he ought to contribute something.

'Where are the posters?'

Danny pointed up to the back of the cinema. 'All the really good ones are in the corridor back there.'

The Doctor nodded and started to make his way up the flight of stairs towards the darkness. Romana and Danny fell into step behind him. As they reached the top, the Doctor snapped on his torch again, and found the velvet curtain that led to the fire exit, the toilet and the hallway of posters.

'Urn, you can stay here if you like...'

Romana and Danny looked at each other. 'Gulp,' said Romana. 'What a choice. Go with you into the hallway of horrors there, or stay here with whatever decides to come and investigate what's taking you so long to deliver on your agreement.'

'It's all right, Romana,' said Danny. 'There's nothing to be scared of.' He squeezed her hand reassuringly, andRomana smiled weakly.

'That's easy for you to say,' she muttered.

The Doctor stepped forward and pulled the heavy velvet aside, shining the light down the corridor.

Nothing moved.

'Come on then.'

They moved into the corridor, and Danny let the curtain fall back into place behind him.

The Doctor stopped by the first poster, and clicked off the torch. The image was glowing slightly, a faint purple light shimmering round the frame. At the top of the image, stark white letters spelt out the subject of the film: A horror horde of crawl-and- crush giants clawing out of the Earth from mile-deep catacombs!' The film's title followed: *'Them'.*

TWELVE

The army were in charge and, as usual, they were taking a thrashing at the hands of the invading enemy. Tanks, jeeps and land-rovers lay scattered about like a child's toys. The air was full of dust and smoke. Several bodies were strewn on the ground, their heads turned away, faces hidden from sight. Water ran down the gutters. Shop windows were smashed. Alarms blared. In the distance the sound of sporadic gunfire echoed, along with the crashing of breaking glass.

The Doctor, Romana and Danny stepped into the street. The smell of burning rubber hit them and the Doctor waved his scarf around to try and clear the air. Danny coughed and stumbled on a broken brick underfoot, and Romanainspected the glass strewn ground with distaste.

'Not as unpleasant as it could be...' said the Doctor through his scarf.

Romana huffed. 'So where do you think the kids are?'

'Somewhere frightening... now where might be frightening?'

'You're enjoying this, aren't you?'

The Doctor flashed one of his winning smiles in her direction. 'Whatever gives you that idea? This way.'

With that he strode off towards where the shooting and crashing noises seemed to be originating. Romana and Danny hurried to catch him up.

Danny was looking around in amazement. He'd never seen anything quite like this before. It was like television or the pictures, but all around him. He decided that he quite liked it, really, and mentally reminded himself that it wasn't real.

The Doctor turned a corner and abruptly stopped. Romana and Danny cannoned into his back and then stood and looked in amazement at the scene in front of them.

Three enormous black ants were being bombarded with gunfire from a group of soldiers stationed in a gutted shop. The ants were screeching and waving their legs and antennae around as the bullets and grenades hit them, but, aside from this, the weapons seemed to be having little effect on the creatures. Over to one side was the shattered wood and glass front window of a general store, and inside people were screaming.

The Doctor, Romana and Danny edged their way round some overturned vehicles, and made their way carefully towards the store. The soldiers were totally preoccupied with letting everything they had fly at the ants, and didn't notice the three figures as they slipped through the broken window and into the darkness beyond.

Inside the shop, the screaming was louder, and it was joined with sobbing and crying. Making their way through the shattered debris of several shelves of food to the back of the shop, the Doctor found the source of the noise, a large group of boys and girls, all dressed in nineties clothing, and all terrified out of their wits.

His eyes roving over the group, the Doctor turned to Romana. 'We've got to calm them down, stop them being afraid. Then we can get them back to the cinema.'

Romana nodded and, still clutching Danny's hand, moved to the nearest group. With gentle words, and calming gestures, she managed to quieten the first couple of girls enough to stop them crying. With Danny's help, she moved on to the next group, and the next.

The Doctor, meanwhile, was nervously scanning the front of the shop. The gunfire had died down a little, but he was certain he had seen something moving in the shadows. A low chittering emerged from a pool of darkness at the left, and the Doctor swallowed. Time to set up a distraction.

Glancing back to where Romana and Danny were talking to the other children, the Doctor turned and carefully made his way down one of the aisles. His feet crunched on the contents of several bags of sugar that had burst as they hit the floor.

Reaching the junction of a cross-aisle, the Doctor poked his head around. Nothing. He listened intently for a moment and thought he heard a furtive scuffling noise. He ducked around the aisle and, on hands and knees, crawled to the next junction. He risked a quick look.

About twenty feet away, a giant ant was standing, antennae tasting the air and mandibles scissoring together with a faint clicking noise. It was not quite as large as those outside - this one was around six-feet long as opposed to the twelve feet of the monsters attacking the soldiers - but it still presented a formidable adversary. As the Doctor watched, the ant took a couple of steps towards him and then stopped again, its gleaming black head slightly cocked as though it were listening for something.

Gently, the Doctor pushed himself backwards. He stopped for a moment and thought. How to dispose of one giant ant without sending all the children at the back of the shop back into shock. He looked around and his gaze alighted on a rack of garden produce. He rose to his feet and slowly moved closer. Plant fertiliser, garden forks, sturdy gloves, DDT dust... DDT!

The Doctor picked up one of the plastic tubes of DDT. Looking at the instructions, he saw that it was guaranteed to kill all garden pests. Humans... thought the Doctor. Only humans could develop a chemical to kill insects that would also eventually poison themselves.

He quickly picked up five of the tubes and quietly tiptoed back to the aisle with the spilled sugar. He grabbed hold of some unbroken bags, and put them on the floor. Then he opened the first DDT canister and started pouring the white powder onto the sugar.

THIRTEEN

Senses working overtime, the ant sniffed the air once more. It could smell humans, but this was mixed with other tastes. Fruit and sweetness. Just the sort of thing to make an ant want to go tell its friends and then come back for the gorging.

Suddenly, the ant's head snapped up. In front of it was one of the two-legged creatures. The creature made a sharp fluting whistling noise and vanished off to one side. The ant scuttled further along the aisle, its legs easily manoeuvring past the fallen produce and came to the junction. Its multi-faceted eyes just caught a flash of movement as a long, knitted object was dragged out of view a little further on.

The ant scurried forward again and twitched its antennae as it picked up the smell of sweet sugar syrup. On the floor in the middle of the aisle was a slowly spreading puddle of golden syrup, sugar, and vanilla ice cream. The ant tentatively moved towards it, chittering gently to itself. It lowered its mandibles into the sticky goo and tasted. Then, it moved closer and started to suck up the sweet concoction.

Above it, resting precariously on top of the rack of shelves, the Doctor gently lifted his arm and started to sprinkle the ant with DDT dust from the tube. The fine white grains fell like snow and coated the coarse hairs on the black carapace of the creature.

Just as the Doctor emptied the tube and was about to start on the next, the ant stiffened and backed away from the puddle. It started to twitch, and then fell down on its own legs before struggling back up again. Its movements became more violent as the DDT started to take effect, and it stumbled into the pool of syrup. Unable to control its movements, it slumped into the sticky goo and drummed its legs on the ground for a time, before the movements subsided and it dropped its head into the puddle.

The Doctor dropped down from the shelves and stepped closer to the barely twitching form. The ant was not going anywhere else in a hurry.

The Doctor tutted to himself and shook his head. Even the taking of hostile insect life was against his deeper principles, and yet sometimes even a Time Lord had to do what a Time Lord had to do. He turned and swiftly made his way back to Romana and the children.

Romana had managed to calm the group down, and as the Doctor approached she was just finishing telling them that everything would be all right.

The Doctor cast his gaze over the children and beamed one of his smiles at them. 'Now... Who wants to go home?'

Immediately hands shot up and voices raised in agreement. The Doctor hushed his hands at them and put his finger to his lips.

'Shhhh.'

When all was quiet again, the Doctor spoke. 'Now, to get home, we're all going to have to close our eyes.'

Some of the children looked worried, but Romana smiled encouragingly at them.

'It's like a dream in reverse,' piped up Danny. 'Only you have to close your eyes to get out of it, rather than opening them.'

'That's right,' beamed the Doctor. 'So, can you all close your eyes, and repeat after me...'

He looked as all the children screwed up their eyes.

'This is not real...'

A chorus of voices repeated the line.

'We're not really here...'

'We want to go home...'

'We're not afraid...'

As the voices chimed in again, the Doctor could see that the surrounding walls were starting to fade, to be replaced by the dimly lit corridor of the cinema.

'We're not afraid...' he said again, and smiled as the cinema replaced the shattered shop before his eyes.

'Stay calm, everyone,' he said, 'and open your eyes.'

Twenty pairs of eyes opened and then opened wider in astonishment and pleasure as they saw that they were back in the cinema.

'Now, stay very quiet and gather round.'

In the confines of the corridor, this was hard, but somehow the Doctor managed to cluster the children to him.

'We're going to go down to the foyer now and wait. So, everyone follow Romana there...'

Romana smiled and gave a little wave before moving off towards the curtain.

The children all followed her, all, that was, except Danny, who stayed by the Doctor and watched as they silently trooped out.

The Doctor looked down at him. 'You don't have to stay, you know, you can go with them.'

Danny nodded. 'I know that... but... well...' he leaned in to the Doctor as though about to confide a great secret.'Romana was a bit scared in there.'

The Doctor frowned in a serious way and nodded thoughtfully.

'...and I think she might need me to stop her being too scared.'

The Doctor marvelled at the capacity of human children to put themselves before others.

'Okay, Danny,' said the Doctor, 'but next time might be even more scary.'

'That's fine,' said Danny lightly. 'I know it's only make-believe anyway. Those things can't really hurt us, not as long as we know they don't really exist.'

The Doctor smiled and looked up as Romana re-entered the corridor.

'They're all down in the foyer and everything is very quiet. On the way we picked up some more children. It looks as though others are escaping as the power weakens. I've left a couple of the older children in charge and warned them to stay together and not to go close to any of the posters.' She held up her hand in which was a screwed up ball of paper. 'And just to be on the safe side I took the liberty of removing that chainsaw poster... just in case.'

The Doctor nodded sagely. 'Very wise.'

'I suspect,' Romana continued, 'that our removing the children from this poster has acted to alleviate the flow of power into the conglomerate mass, thus depriving it of much of its latent power.'

Danny looked confused.

'We've weakened it,' said the Doctor in a stage whisper, and Danny nodded. 'So,' said the Doctor in a normal voice. 'Where next?'

He moved along the corridor and saw that of the three remaining posters, only one was glowing faintly.

'Are we ready to do it again?' he said.

FOURTEEN

International super-criminal Fu Manchu was having a bad day. First, his secret underground base had been infiltrated by an impostor: one Franz Bulmer, pretending to be the scientist Otto Lentz. Bulmer had escaped, but Fu Manchu had no intention of letting this get in the way of his plans. He intended to destroy a world arms conference with his powerful sonic weapon, and to discredit the dastardly Commissioner Nayland Smith into the bargain. More worrying was the sudden appearance in his Tibetan lair of a group of English children. His guards had them all under lock and key, but Fu Manchu was certain that this might be the start of a convoluted plot to stop him.

The tall Chinaman stood up and walked to one side, gazing off into the distance thoughtfully. He still had all the girls - his 'brides' - under lock and key. Even the latest acquisition to his ranks, Marie, the so-up-tight daughter of Otto Lentz, was now under control. Perhaps he could deal with all his problems in one swoop.

'Feng...'

Fu Manchu barked for his current number two. His previous number two had been a loyal servant... until the incident with the snakes. He sighed. Sometimes you needed to make sacrifices if only to impress upon the others how important it was to be diligent at all times, especially when the safety of Fu Manchu was at stake.

Feng appeared by his side, head bowed.

'Fetch me the new English girl.'

The black-clad servant nodded and then hurried away. He well knew the penalty for keeping his Master waiting.

Fu Manchu glided with a cat-like grace across the control room and entered his main hall. Sawdust covered the floor, and there was a series of stone pillars along the edges. Each pillar was fitted with iron rings where his guests could be tethered as he performed his dastardly rituals. To one side was a regal-looking chair. It was from here that he made his announcements to the world. Settling himself down, he waited for Feng.

Another servant entered from the communications room. 'Master,' he said humbly.

Fu Manchu glanced at him. 'Speak.'

'Master, we have heard voices in the passages. More people have arrived.'

'From where?'

'We don't know. A man and a woman at least.'

Fu Manchu narrowed his eyes. Maybe this was the real attack. No matter. He would have the situation under control before long. He dismissed the servant with an imperious wave of his hand. Feng shouldn't be too much longer, not if he valued his life.

Shortly, Feng entered, dragging a dishevelled and crying girl behind him. He pushed her forward and then all but threw her at the foot of the steps leading up to Fu Manchu's chair and the covered snake pit beyond. She landed in a heap, and lay there crying, not understanding anything that was happening.

Fu Manchu gazed at her. A strange specimen, and so oddly dressed. He took in the tight blue trousers and white top, cut to reveal all but her upper arms and torso. The neckline dipped alarmingly, and Fu Manchu considered that he could almost see the top of the girl's breastbone. This in itself was not unusual by Fu Manchu's standards. He liked his brides to wear as little as possible. Peasant blouses seemed to be the staple wardrobe for young girls these days, but this one was somehow... different.

He waved his hand at Feng, who retired to stand at the back of the room by the door, his head bowed in deference.

'Child?' The Chinaman's voice was not entirely unfriendly.

Tanya looked up and took in the sight before her: Christopher Lee dressed in emerald green oriental robes, sitting on a throne looking down at her. None of this made any sense.

'Child?' said Fu Manchu again. 'What is your name?'

Tanya swallowed a sob. T - Tanya, sir.'

'Tanya...' Christopher Lee rolled the name around his lips like a fine wine.

Tanya felt like smiling, but was still somewhat bewildered as to how she and Bob came to find themselves locked in a smelly cell by a bunch of Chinamen when the last thing she could remember was snogging with her boyfriend in the cinema.

Fu Manchu rose from his seat and descended the steps towards Tanya. He held out his hand: 'Stand.'

It was not a request, and Tanya struggled to her feet, grasping onto his proffered hand for support as she did so.

'What are these clothes you wear?'

Tanya looked puzzled. Her fear was starting to ebb away now. 'What?'

The man lifted his hand and fingered the arm of her

T-shirt. 'What is this material?'

'It's a T-shirt... and jeans. Excuse me, but who are you?'

The man smiled and stepped closer to her. 'You'll find out soon enough,' he whispered before gently reaching out and placing both his hands on either side of her head.

Tanya drew in a breath and her eyes opened wide as the man gazed levelly into her eyes. The pressure from his hands intensified slightly, and his eyes bore into hers. She found that she could not blink. There was something... something attractive about his eyes. She stared into them and listened as the man spoke.

'You have no will, no mind of your own. You will do only what I command you to do... even until death.'

As the words registered in her brain, so she found herself getting dizzy. The man's eyes bored into her. He was right. She was not thinking for herself. As the edges of her vision started to grey, she heard, as if from a great distance, a soft, smooth voice talking to her.

'You have no desires but to please your Master... This is what you will do...'

FIFTEEN

Corridors, thought the Doctor. Why do we always end up in corridors?

They had found themselves standing in a stone passageway lined with locked doors. Each door contained a small window, and, after checking one or two, the Doctor decided that they must be cells. The first had a ragged-looking man crouching in, while the second seemed empty at first, before the Doctor noticed a grubby foot protruding from underneath a pile of straw.

The corridor was lit with a flaming torch set into a holder in the wall. The Doctor lifted it down and used it to light their way.

He led Romana and Danny along the passage, and found another passage, almost identical to the first. They were part way down it when the Doctor heard the sound of someone approaching, and hurriedly pushed the others back the way they came. From the relative safety of the corner, the Doctor watched as a black-clad Chinese man, wearing a black cap and red belt, dragged a crying girl along the corridor and through one of the doors. The girl was dressed in a T-shirt and jeans and the Doctor felt sure that this must be Tanya.

When the footsteps and crying had died away, the Doctor and his party made their way back down the corridor. The Doctor checked the doorway that the Chinese and Tanya had taken and found that it led onto a flight of steps leading up.

Romana, meanwhile, wandered further along the corridor. Her whisper sounded loud in the enclosed space: 'Doctor! Here.'

The Doctor hurried to where she was looking through the grille on another cell door. Inside was a youth of about sixteen, sitting on the floor and looking despondent.

'Psst!' The Doctor attracted his attention.

The boy got up and jumped to the door. 'Who are you? How did you get here? Have you come to get me out of this?'

The Doctor smiled. 'Yes, a form of magic, and yes. Stand back.'

The Doctor rummaged in his pockets and came out with a penknife. He opened one of the implements and started poking it in the lock. 'Atraxian penknife,' he muttered. 'Never leave... the swamp... without... one. Ah!'

There was a loud click and the door swung open. The Doctor beamed like a child and even Romana looked impressed. 'Not the sonic screwdriver, then.'

'No,' the Doctor smiled some more. 'But that would have been my second choice.'

'Bob!'

As the boy left the cell, so Danny saw him and rushed to him. Bob grasped Danny by the waist and swung him up, giving him a swift hug. 'It's all right now, Danny-boy. We're gonna get out of this mess.'

While they were talking, the Doctor was moving down the row of cells, checking them and opening any which contained twentieth-century children. Soon there were about ten kids standing in the corridor, all talking together and looking a little confused. Some of the younger ones were still crying to themselves, but the older kids had done their best to try and quieten things down.

The Doctor looked round at the assembled crowd and pondered the significance of his performing like the pied piper. 'Right,' he announced to no-one in particular. 'Time to get you all back home.'

'What about Tanya?' Bob looked round at everyone. 'She's not here. They came and took her away.'

The Doctor nodded. 'Don't worry about her. We'll go and get her.'

'But, Doctor,' said Romana, 'if we've weakened the entity already, won't Tanya be freed when we return all these?' She gestured at the assembled kids.

'Maybe...' muttered the Doctor darkly. 'Or maybe she'll be so terrorised that it supplies sufficient energy for our friend to start trapping people again.' He gestured for Danny to come over and the small boy complied. 'Do you think you can stay here and look after this group until we get back with Tanya?'

Danny nodded. 'I'll tell them what's been happening.'

The Doctor walked back to the stairway, as Romana ushered all the children back into one cell. Although the door would not lock, it would be far less conspicuous than a crowd of children thronging the corridor should anyone wander past.

She then hurried back along the passage to the Doctor, and the two of them started up the stairs.

SIXTEEN

As the Doctor and Romana reached the top of the stairs, they heard crying. A girl. Romana listened intently and then led the way through dark corridors until they came to an impressive wooden doorway which opened onto a room with pillars all round the edge. To one side of the room, in an alcove, they could see Tanya lying on a pile of straw, crying to herself.

The Doctor and Romana edged into the room, wary of traps, but there was nothing apparently to be seen. After four steps with no phalanx of guards emerging to cut them to pieces, the Doctor hurried to where Tanya lay.

As he approached, she looked up and her crying stopped. She stared up at the Doctor, tears sparkling in her eyes.

'Oh, please... please don't hurt me.'

'I'm not going to hurt you,' said the Doctor. 'Now stay calm.'

As he reached the girl she wrapped her arms around him and started crying with relief. The Doctor saw that she had a heavy iron collar manacled around her neck, and attached to a ring in the wall by a chain. He felt in his pockets again and came out with a handful of assorted money. He shoved it back in and rummaged again. This time, he came out with a paper clip. He unfolded the wire and then, asking Tanya to hold still, gently probed the lock on the ring around her neck.

After a few moments, he frowned. Nothing happened. He tried again, but still nothing happened. He sat back and looked at the paper clip and the keyhole.

Romana, watching what he was doing with a wry smile on her face, gently took the paper clip from him and, with an endearing smile at Tanya and a withering one at the Doctor, inserted it into the lock. With a sharp twist of her wrist, the lock clicked and the manacle sprang open.

'Beginner's luck,' muttered the Doctor as she pressed the paper clip back into his hand.

Romana helped Tanya to her feet and she stood there gingerly rubbing her neck. Time we got out of here,' saidRomana, and started to walk back through the room the way they had come.

'Not that way,' said Tanya. 'They'll be waiting now.'

The Doctor stopped and looked at her. 'Who'll be waiting?'

'Oh. Those... Chinese people,' said Tanya vaguely. 'I think it's this way.'

With that she turned and walked off between two of the pillars and through a doorway that had been concealed there. The Doctor looked at Romana. 'This is all getting a little serious...'

Romana nodded. 'I know... we mustn't get too involved, as it's not real. Fun though, isn't it.' With a grin she strode off after Tanya.

The Doctor took up the rear, nervously looking about him for the trap that he was sure should have been sprung by now.

Tanya led the Doctor and Romana through a veritable maze of corridors. Some brick-lined, some stone. Along the way flaming torches lit the way and the smoke caught in their throats. Eventually she led them out of a flickering tunnel into an antechamber where she stopped.

'About time,' said the Doctor. 'Now where are we... we have to get back to your friends, Tanya.'

As the Doctor and Romana looked about them, Tanya moved to stand to one side of the room. Romana looked across at her and saw that she was staring fixedly into space.

'Tanya?' Crossing to the girl, Romana waved her hand across Tanya's eyes. No reaction. Not even a blink. 'Doctor... I think we have a problem.'

The Doctor looked across and saw Romana standing with the mesmerised Tanya.

'She does not even hear you.'

The voice was rich and cultured, tinged with the Chinese accent that had terrorised the politicians of the world for so long.

The Doctor and Romana turned as the regal form of Fu Manchu stepped forward out of the darkness at the other end of the room. On the left of him was the figure of Feng, head bowed as always, and on the right was another figure, a young Chinese girl. Like Fu Manchu she was dressed in oriental robes: black with a pink motif embroidered on the front, but unlike Feng, she carried her head high and, the Doctor noted, there was an arrogance in her stance that marked her out as being someone of importance... or, he corrected, someone who *thought* they were someone of importance.

'Thank you, my dear,' continued Fu Manchu. 'You have done well.'

Tanya gave no sign that she had heard, but continued to stand immobile, eyes staring at her

Master.

'Now,' the elegant Manchu glided forward until he was standing in front of the Doctor. 'Who exactly are you, and why are you here? Did Nayland Smith send you?'

'Well,' the Doctor began with a chuckle, 'If I told you that, I don't think you'd believe me, and anyway, I don't think we've been properly introduced... I'm the Doctor, how do you do?' The Doctor grasped Fu Manchu's manicured hand and pumped it up and down enthusiastically.

Fu Manchu looked aghast and withdrew his hand as Feng leaped forward and placed himself between his Master and the stranger. Fu Manchu looked down at his hand as though it had been defaced in some way.

'No-one,' he hissed. '...No-one touches my person without permission and lives.'

'Father.' The Chinese girl, who had been watching the proceedings with amusement, stepped forward. 'Your methods can be somewhat... damaging?' She flashed her eyes over the Doctor and then walked towards Romana. 'Let me have this one. I'll try not to hurt it... for the moment... and I guarantee the information you need.'

Fu Manchu smiled. 'So be it, Lin Tang. But this one...' he pointed with his little finger at the Doctor,

'...will suffer.'

With that he swept around and stalked away down the corridor, head held high.

'Oh good, he's gone,' smiled the Doctor. 'Perhaps we can have a sensible conversation now. Any chance of a cup of... oh. You're still here then.'

Feng had moved around behind the Doctor and was holding a viciously sharplooking knife up to the Doctor's throat. The Doctor risked a look down and winced. 'I hope you're careful with that. You could hurt someone.'

'Silence.' Lin Tang spoke without looking at the Doctor. Her gaze was fixed on Romana who was looking back with cool detachment.

The Chinese girl stepped forward and placed her hands gently on Romana's head, drawing her gaze towards her eyes. She stroked the sides of Romana's face with her thumbs and then carefully pulled them down over Romana's eyes, closing them. With a slight pressure against Romana's eyeballs, she whispered: 'You have no will, no desires but to please your Masters.'

Removing her thumbs, Romana's eyes stayed closed.

The girl looked across at the Doctor, and smiled. It was not a nice smile. She then returned her gaze to Romana.

'You may open your eyes.'

Romana's eyes flicked open and looked into the slitted brown eyes of the Chinese girl.

'Everything I command you will carry out,' said Lin Tang.

'Everything I command you will carry out,' repeated Romana, her eyes locked in place.

'You will obey me,' whispered the girl.

'You will obey me...' repeated Romana.

For a full minute, Lin Tang and Romana remained in place, both gazing into each others eyes. Then, Romana raised her hand, and palmed the Chinese girl's eyes closed. 'I think,' said Romana, 'that this may be our way out of here.'

She looked at the Doctor and smiled.

Feng was watching the exchange and growing increasingly agitated. The knife was starting to wobble, and the Doctor was becoming uneasy as well.

'Umm, Romana, I don't want to sound impatient, but can you deal with our friend here?'

Romana nodded and turned to the girl. 'Lin Tang, can you get our friend with the knife to maybe go off to sleep, eh?'

Lin Tang opened her eyes and turned to Feng. 'Feng!' she snapped. 'Feng, sleep now.'

In an instant, Feng's eyes clouded over and he slumped to the ground at the Doctor's feet. Leaving him snoring gently, the Doctor walked across to where Lin Tang was standing. He waved his hand in front of her eyes and saw that she didn't flinch. 'Impressive...'

'Practical,' said Romana. 'That's the trouble with these evil oriental dictator-types, they don't know when to call it a day. I was top of my hypnosis class at the academy.'

'I didn't think they graded them,' said the Doctor quizzically.

Romaria smiled. 'They didn't, but by the time I'd finished, the tutor was convinced that they did.'

The Doctor smiled. 'I'm sure he was.'

Romana stood in front of Lin Tang. 'Why don't you see what you can do with Tanya there,' she said to the Doctor, 'while I give this young lady some instructions which might make life slightly more tricky for her father.'

Before long, Tanya was looking around herself in a somewhat bewildered state, while Lin Tang hurried off after her father. She would soon discover that Romana had made it difficult for her to exert quite as much power over her victims as before.

The Doctor, Romana and Tanya made their way back through the passages and down into the lower levels. Just before they arrived at the cells, they heard a commotion break out above them. Running feet and shouting.

Romana smiled. 'Sounds like the cavalry have arrived.'

In the cell, Danny had explained to the rest of the children what was going on, and they were sitting in a circle, trying hard to be calm. When the Doctor, Romana and Tanya walked in, Danny jumped up in pleasure. Bob was also overjoyed and he and Tanya hugged each other tight as the Doctor returned Danny to the circle.

'Okay everyone,' he said. 'Now just close your eyes and repeat after me...'

SEVENTEEN

Back in the foyer of the cinema, the Doctor and Romana counted the children. There were well over fifty, with more wandering down from the upper level every moment. There were also three adults present: the cinema Manager, Mr Stevenson, and the two members of staff, Mavis and Susie. All had become trapped in posters, and had found themselves freed as the entity loosened its grip. Like many of the kids, they were still somewhat shocked by their experience.

'Doors are still locked,' said Romana, giving them an experimental shake.

'I expect our friend upstairs is channelling whatever available energy it has into keeping them that way.' The Doctor looked around. 'What we need is a distraction...'

'You don't mean...'

The Doctor looked at Romana. 'Yes I do, and why do you always state the obvious?'

'Sorry.'

'Accepted. What we need are some games...'

'Games?'

'Yes. Games. To distract it from keeping the doors locked. Romana, I want you and Danny to start up some games, while I go and see how things are upstairs.'

Romana looked up the flight of steps into the darkness that lurked at the top. 'Okay,' she said, without much enthusiasm. 'We'll see what we can do.'

The Doctor turned and re-adjusted his hat on his head before taking off up the stairs four at a time. Behind him he could hear the sound of Romana and Danny organising a series of games for the kids. Choosing sides for an impromptu round of coke-can football by the sounds of it. As he turned the corner at the top, the Doctor was engulfed in darkness once more. The sounds faded to be replaced by a sighing, dripping noise, which grew in intensity as the Doctor neared the auditorium.

Pushing through the curtain, the Doctor tentatively approached the front of the cinema. Before him the giant white screen stretched up and across, and all around shadows skittered and skimmed. He leaned over the balcony as far as he could and saw a faint purple glow roiling in the pit.

'So... not out of power yet...' the Doctor murmured as he made his way to one of the gratings which led to a spiral flight of steps leading down into the pit. He vaulted over the gate and paused at the top of the steps, listening intently. From the foyer he could hear happy cries and screams as the kids indulged in whatever game Romana had concocted for them.

Warily, the Doctor made his way down the steps.

EIGHTEEN

In the darkness by the front of the screen, something roiled and pulsed with a faint violet light. The Doctor stopped at the bottom of the spiralling stairs and peered into the gloom, trying to allow his eyes to grow accustomed to the darkness.

He stepped off the stairs and his feet sunk into a soft and mushy layer of dust, accumulated crisp packets, coke cans, popcorn and other debris that had fallen - or had been thrown - from the balcony above. He warily took another step, the rubbish crunching gently under his feet.

There was a sighing whisper, and the rolling purple-hued darkness moved in front of him. The Doctor pushed his hat down on his head, and, shoving his hands deep into his trouser pockets, affected a look of seriousness.

'You can't win, you know...?'

The sighing whispering paused for a moment, and then the Doctor heard words, weakly at first, but growing in strength.

'What... have... you... done?'

The cadences were the same as before. A million voices speaking the words, one overlaid on top of the other. Extracts from film soundtracks, broken down and replayed at the wrong speeds.

'Well,' the Doctor pushed at the rubbish with his foot in a nonchalant sort of way, 'I've taken away your energy supply. The children you trapped, and from whom you were draining the emotional power, are no longer trapped. You had no intention of freeing them anyway...'

'We... sensed... interference,' the voices confirmed. 'But... we... can... survive... you... can... not... stop... us...'

'Bold words from a thing that doesn't even have a body,' taunted the Doctor. 'Come on. Show yourself if you're not beaten. Face me.'

There was a stirring in the darkness, and the Doctor watched as, slowly, a form emerged. It was a smaller version of the monstrosity that had appeared on the stairs earlier. Stumpy white legs, and a torso topped with a face on a long neck. The face kept changing as before, although the rate of change, noted the Doctor with some satisfaction, was far slower.

The creature stumped towards the Doctor and stopped a few feet away. The Doctor shook his head. 'Is that the best you can do? It's pathetic. Pathetic. You hide yourself away down here like a... a... mole, and only pop out to say "hello" when it suits you.' The Doctor turned his back on the creature, and made as if to return up the stairs. 'There's no point,' he said. 'I've faced Daleks, Cybermen, Sontarans, Drashigs and the Master and all were uglier than you. I'm wasting my time.'

With a roar of rage, the creature surged forward and caught the Doctor's arm with a flailing misshapen hand, spinning him round.

'You... dare... mock... us!'

The Doctor looked the morphing face in the eye. 'Yes, I dare.'

With another bellow, the creature flung the Doctor across the pit. He skidded through the muck on the floor and landed in a heap, cans and crisp packets flying and clattering around him. Checking to make sure he was all right, the Doctor jumped back to his feet. 'I dare...' he shouted, '... because you are nothing. You came from nothing, and you'll go back there. Go on, attack me again, if you can!'

The creature surged across the floor, but the Doctor could see that his plan was working. The energy now being expended was not being replenished, and the creature was weakening. Purple tendrils of light were breaking through the creature's joints, and it slowed as it came nearer.

The head on its sinuous neck whipped from side to side. 'What... is... happening?'

'It's the end,' replied the Doctor. 'So sorry you couldn't stay.'

'No... no... no... NO!'

The creature roared out its rage, expending more energy in the process. The head whipped down and saw that the purple light was spilling from its leg, and the leg was unravelling beneath it. With a thump, the creature fell over and tried to push itself back up again with its arms, but they too were spinning away into vapour.

The Doctor watched as the physical form of the entity grew smaller and smaller, and its thrashing became weaker.

'You... tricked... us...' it shouted faintly. 'We... cannot... die... we... are... imm -'

With a flash of light, the creature unspun its physical presence of rubbish back onto the floor leaving ropes of purple light, which coiled and writhed. The roiling darkness from which the being had emerged also started to contract until the Doctor was standing in front of a globe of streaked darkness which was contracting in on itself.

'Roll credits...' muttered the Doctor.

The ball grew smaller and smaller until it vanished from sight with a faint popping sound.

The End.'

The Doctor shook his head. Defeated by its own ambition. What a way to go. With a final look around the basement pit, the Doctor started to climb up the spiral staircase once more.

NINETEEN

Back in the foyer, the Doctor found that the main doors were open, and all the children, with the exception of Danny, Bob and Tanya, had gone.

Romana looked up as the Doctor descended the stairs.

The doors flew open a few moments ago, and the kids decided that they'd had enough and went.'

'Except me,' said Danny. 'I wanted to make sure that you were alright, but Romana wouldn't let me go upstairs.' Danny grasped the Doctor's hand and pulled him down to crouch at his level. 'I think she's still a bit scared,' he whispered.

The Doctor grinned. 'And so she should be,' he boomed. He gripped Danny's hand firmly and shook it. 'Thank you, Danny,' he said.

Danny smiled and shook the Doctor's hand back. 'Are you going now?' he asked.

The Doctor nodded. 'Our work here is finished, for the moment.' He looked over at Romana, who smiled back.

The Doctor stood up and looked around the foyer. 'Somehow I don't think there'll be many more films shown here.'

'1998, isn't it?' said Romana. The Doctor nodded. 'That's when the Rembrandt was demolished,' she confirmed. 'Against public opinion, of course. Turned into another housing estate.'

Danny smiled again at the Doctor and returned to Bob and Tanya, who were standing by the doors, ready to go.

'I'm not sure what happened,' began Bob, 'but... thanks. Both of you.'

Romana smiled and bent to give Danny a kiss. 'Thanks for looking after me,' she whispered.

Danny blushed beetroot red, and grasped Bob's hand firmly. With a final look back, the three of them walked out through the doors and into the sunlight.

'That stuff about the cinema being demolished,' said the Doctor. 'How did you know that?'

Romana looked guilty. 'Well a girl's got to have a hobby.'

Together they stepped out of the cinema and looked up at the impressive Art Deco façade.

'A shame, really,' said Romana. 'It's a great looking building.'

'Mmmm,' mumbled the Doctor. His eyes flashed and he grabbed Romana by the hand. 'Come on, Romana,' he smiled. 'Places to go... people to see... worlds to save... games to play...'

Romana sighed. The Doctor, she supposed, had to have a hobby too.

The Giving Invasion
By
Paul Leonard

You meet some pretty odd people when you work in the charity fund-raising sector, but the Doctor was one of the oddest I ever met. The riotous hair, the weird coat, the hat, the insanely long scarf - no, let's be fair, I could cope with bad dress sense. And his real name was John Smith, so I could understand the extra handle. But his earnest expression, the way those big bug-eyes of his fixed on to you - no, no, I couldn't handle that. And the way he behaved that morning we had the power cut - anybody would think the world was about to be destroyed, or invaded by aliens.

Which was what Kev said had happened, or was about to happen, but then he was pissed, and that was a long time later.

But first let me introduce myself. My name is Benjamin Williams, otherwise known as the Jammer, and I'm Floor Supervisor for the National Fund-raising Team. We work in a big concrete seventies-style office with dirty white walls, bad air conditioning and a carpet that's so bland I can't remember what colour it is, even though I work there every day.

Basically, what we do is phone people up and ask them for money. You might think that's hard, but it's not, not if you do the job properly. Trouble is, most of my team don't.

It's the word "charity" that does it. The thought that, instead of raising money for fat- cat capitalists selling unsavoury environmentally damaging double glazing, or whatever, you're instead asking people to help some poor starving kid in India, or that old lady suffering with arthritis, or at worst the local cats' home - that brings in all the odd bods. The idealists. The people who think they can save the world by making a few phone calls. I know it's not true, and so do the best callers. But the ones like the Doctor - incurable idealists. All of them.

The fact is, it's the poor and the old you're asking for money, mostly. And money they can ill afford. The sick, the weak, the old, the dying, those are the most charitable people around, because they understand what it is to suffer, and have the time to think about it. So they're the ones we phone up and ask to give us ten pounds a month. If we could, we'd probably phone the cats, too.

And if I sound cynical, that's because I am. When your boss wears a different suit every day and sends his kids to a private school, you do wonder where all these charitable funds go.

Still, it's a job. And I'm just idealistic enough to think it's better than selling double- glazing.

I knew the Doctor was going to be trouble the minute he walked in. It wasn't just what he looked like. He wanted to know *everything* - where the money went, who we phoned, why we used this method of fund-raising, which charities we worked for (answer: anyone who'll pay), even why half the light switches in the office aren't connected to anything (answer: the rent is low). His tone of moral seriousness, enlightened by a little juggling and trying to adjust the phone system with a screwdriver, served to reduce the initial training session to a complete shambles. I could see the other trainees - especially the ones who had a bit of nonce about them and might one day make good fund-raisers - looking at him aghast. I could almost see it written on their faces: *what am I doing here when they employ prats like this?*

I decided that I was going to have to have a word with my colleague Matt about interview techniques, some time in the very near future. Either that or do all the interviews myself.

In the meantime I took the Doctor aside at the end of the training, and told him very gently that whilst I appreciated his commitment and enthusiasm, he was here to make phone calls, not to investigate the light switches, and that with all due respect, juggling was not allowed in the phone room.

'I've met your type before,' he said sadly, his big bug-earnest eyes staring at me. 'It's so sad.'

I wasn't about to let this go unchallenged. 'What's sad?'

'You. All that potential, going to waste.' He stood up, and for one lovely moment I thought he was going to walk out, which would mean we wouldn't have to pay him for the training. But all he said was, 'Never mind. I'll just leave the juggling to a different incarnation.'

Which was very enlightening. Now I didn't just suspect he was a total loony, I knew
it.

Talk about potential going to waste.

Monday morning in the phone room. Total chaos. The boss (I'd better give him a name: Kevin "the Dealer" Jones, but I should point out that this has been changed to protect the guilty) - anyway, Kev in his wisdom has decided to re-route the phone system.

Just for those of you who've had the good fortune not to work in a phone room - otherwise known as the human factory farm of the 1990s - the callers sit at long tables, elbow to elbow, like diners jammed into a cheap refectory-style restaurant. In front of them are lots of pieces of paper (no computers yet - Kev is saving up for them, with what's left over from all those school fees and suits). The paper is in several colours, a hopeless attempt to prevent total confusion as to who is calling which charity, and to keep all the information separate afterwards. The callers get confused, and occasionally call NSPCC supporters on behalf of ActionAid, or Help the Aged on behalf of World Vision, or for all I know Oxfam supporters on behalf of the CIA. I try to keep an ear on it all, but even when the monitoring facilities are working (not often), it's hopeless.

That Monday morning it was worse. For the first time, the National Fund-raising Team were taking inbound calls for a charity - that is, covering the telephone lines to answer calls in response to a newspaper advertisement. Nobody knew how many calls to expect, so Kev re-routed half the phones to the line the charity had leased from BT, sat a few of the callers at them, and waited.

People start to open their newspapers at - I don't know - about half past seven? Certainly by eight o'clock. The first callers started to shamble in at about nine-thirty. They're not used to early starts - we normally don't call before eleven, just in case our elderly supporters aren't up yet, or have died during the night and the relatives are waiting for the undertakers to call (and don't laugh, it has happened) - so, yes, there they were, in their sweatshirts and cycle-clips, whizzing yo-yos, clicking their fingers, shaking their long black locks (John Hatterley) or near-bald, monkey-like heads (Carl Simms, otherwise known as DJ Know-Know, in fact he knows nothing). They looked like a tribe of aliens, colonising the bland office and turning it into a space full of weird colour and not-quite human sounds. The sort of people who would have voted for the Raving Monster Screaming Loony Party, when he was still alive.

The one exception to this was the Doctor. He had arrived at eight o'clock on the dot, and sat by his phone, his fingers curled around the handset as if it were a life-jacket in a stormy ocean. But he might as well not have bothered. There wasn't a single phone call. Not at eight, not at nine, not at ten.

At ten-thirty we phoned the charity in question - Earth Aid - to see if there'd been a problem. If the ads hadn't been printed, for example.

They said, yes, there was a big problem - we weren't answering the phones. They'd made several test calls, and no-one was answering at all. The chap at the other end must've been furious. He sounded as if he'd been shouting all morning, his sibilant and angry, like a snake on heat.

I said I would look into it.

'You'dsss bettersss,' hissed the marketing man. 'Orsss the conssssequensssses willsss be dissssasssterousssss.'

I began to wonder if he had a speech impediment.

I ran upstairs to Kev, who was in his suit, in his leather chair, in his office, tapping his fingers on the desk and looking at the screen of his computer.

'We're getting plenty of calls, I see,' he said.

'Yes, but we're not bloody answering them,' I snapped. Sometimes Kev's hands-off approach to management got right on my nerves. 'What's wrong with the sodding phones?'

Kev looked up, his dapper, bearded, slightly Branson-esque face frowning in what appeared to be genuine puzzlement. 'We are answering - in fact - ' he tapped at the keyboard '- the system says we've averaged only five seconds waiting time. And not a single call lost. That's great!' He smoothed the lapels of his suit. 'We really need these clients, you know. They've promised us pots of business with -'

I leaned over the computer and yelled it right into his face. 'Kev, there aren't any calls coming in!'

Kev stared at me. 'What?'

'The phones aren't ringing. Nothing is happening down there.'

I'll give Kev one thing. Once he knows there's a real problem, he's quick off the mark. He was out of his seat and half-way down those stairs before I'd finished the second sentence.

In the phone room, all the lights were out.

Not only that, someone had put all the blinds down. You couldn't see a thing - it was as if the room had been filled with octopus ink. After a few seconds, I could see a dim purple light from the windows, and a grey sliver of light at the far end of the room.

The Doctor was running around. I could hear his voice booming out orders, as if he'd suddenly become a Sergeant-Major or something. 'No light! There mustn't be any light!'

What was this, a spontaneous party?

As my eyes began to adjust, I could see a monkey-like form crouched over a telephone handset. Was it DJ Know-Know? He was gabbling something that might have been rap - it sounded like an alien dialect.

'Ben!' Kev's voice. 'What the -?'

Then suddenly the Doctor was in front of me. He grabbed my lapels and started shouting into my face.

'We need the phone system disconnected!'

'Why?'

'There's no time to argue! Just pull the plug - now!'

I had enough to handle without this as well.

'Doctor, can we just sort out why you've
-?'

He pushed me out of the way, vanished into the confused darkness.

I turned my attention to Carl and the DJ rap. 'Carl, stop that. There's enough going on in here without you making private calls to your mates.' Which it had to be. Even Mr No-No wouldn't talk to a charity supporter like that.

Carl just hissed at me. I mean hissed, like an angry cat. A long arm lashed out, and I'm sure I saw claws.

'For God's sake we haven't got time for fancy dress!' I snapped at him. At that moment the lights came back on.

And the phones started ringing.

The Doctor bawled, 'Answer them!'

Just for once, he was right. 'Get on the phones!' I yelled.

The callers were looking rather spaced-out - even more so than usual. Rows of glazed eyes stared at me from pale faces.

But with both of us shouting at them, habit gradually broke the spell and they got on with it. 'Thanks for calling Earth Aid, Jessica speaking, how can I help you...?'

The chorus rose, and the ringing tones dropped away.

Except for one. I glanced at the Doctor, gestured. He just gestured back, impatiently.

Oh, to hell with it. Anything for a quiet life, we could deal with the sackings later. I picked up the phone.

Thanks for calling Earth Aid, Benjamin Williams speaking, how can I help you...?'

Kids.

I can't tell you how much I hate kids. Give them a free phone number, and you've got hell to get rid of them.

When I used to work for BT, they called us all the time. Singing songs, swearing, giggling, making up robot voices...

This was the robot voices variety: 'We - will - return. You - have - not - de-fea-ted - us. We - will - con-quer - the - Earth!'

'OK,' I said, 'This is a charity line. You're not being very charitable, are you?'

'Cha-ri-ty. Do - not - un-der-stand - cha-ri-ty.'

'You wouldn't, would you?'

'We - will - con-quer! We - will - de-stroy!'

I'd had enough. I hung up.

It was about three weeks later when Kev told me the story according to the Doctor. Carl was leaving us, off to pastures new - another planet, he said. Personally I reckoned it was more likely to be Birmingham. But then, perhaps that is another planet. Who knows?

We all went down to the White Horse and got totally pissed, as we usually do when anyone leaves. With the turnover in our place, that's most Friday nights. And if not, we'll find another excuse.

Anyway, Kev got even more pissed than usual, spilled beer and whisky all down his nice grey suit, and me and one of the relatively sober callers had to haul him off to a taxi.

'We nearly got killed, you know,' he blubbered, as we were standing - well, I was standing, he was sort of half-leaning on a convenient concrete pillar - in the queue for the taxis.

'Killed? What, in the pub?' There had been some sort of fight. There usually is on a Friday night.

'No. That day when we had the power cut. The Doctor told me. He got the lights out just in time. And if we hadn't patched the Daleks into the Mars High Command system in time - they were using - oh, God, I don't know, some technobabble - he said they were going to come down the phone lines and kill us!'

Well, supporters do get annoyed sometimes, but to believe this sort of thing was going a bit far, even for a man who's had eight pints of cheap lager.

'The Doctor saved our lives,' Kev muttered, dribbling slightly. 'Saved all our lives.'

I nodded politely, glanced at the caller, Jessica, who shrugged. We were at the front of the queue now, so I gently escorted Kev to the cab. 'You just watch your wife doesn't kill you when you get home.'

He nodded.

'What happened to the Doctor?' asked Jessica as the cab pulled away.

'Dunno. I was going to sack him, but he left.' I turned my best cynical grin on her. 'Perhaps he went to another planet.'

She grinned back. 'Perhaps.' A slight pause.

I knew what that pause meant, and was right in there.

As I'm always saying to the callers - never miss any opportunities. Especially not on a Friday night.

'A Cup Of Coffee'
By
Daniel Ben-Zvi

It was just a phone.

You know - a telephone. Alexander Graham Bell's baby. That wonder of modern technology. The little device with a headset and buttons and everything. Capable of helping you get in touch with anyone, anywhere, thanks to BT's new one low rate plan....

So why was Sharon shaking at the sight of it?

Sharon just stood there, in the corridor, her arms wrapped tightly around her upper torso. She felt cold even through the heat the café had going in order to combat the chill outside. A shiver passed through her body, unbidden. Her eyes started to water. Tears began to tumble forth from her eyes.

'Stop crying, you bloody cow! Stop making so much bloody noise! All I want when I get home is some peace and quiet and you cannot shut up!' It was so simple. Just walk five steps. Pick up the receiver. Dial the number. People do it all the time.

So why couldn't she?

'You can't do anything right, you fat sow! I dunno what I see in you.'

Sharon staggered her way across the corridor, narrowly avoiding a server carrying a tray piled with desserts. She grabbed at the receiver, her shaking hands causing it to tumble about in her grasp.

One button. Two. Three.... Seven....

'You won't do it. You haven't got the nerve.'

It's ringing. They won't be home. They'll be out somewhere shopping or celebrating or having a grand old time. And they won't want to speak to you. Why in bloody hell would they when you haven't spoken to them for almost two years... The ringing stopped.

'Hello?'

'May I help you, Miss?'

Sharon's head turned, her vision partly obscured by the sunglasses now resting precariously on the bridge of her nose and sliding further down her nose with every inhalation. She raised one well-manicured finger to her nose and pushed the glasses back into place, all the while giving the impression that she was staring intently at the menu.

'Yes, thank you. I'll have.... I'll have the chef salad and some coffee, please.'

'What sort of coffee, Miss?'

'Kenyan, if you have.'

'And what sort of dressing would you like with your salad, miss?'

She thought a moment. 'Bleu cheese.'

'Thank you, Miss. It will only be a few moments.'

Sharon moved off to the side of the counter, letting the other customers order their meals. She glanced at her watch, cursing at the lateness of the hour. If she didn't hurry home, she was going to be late. And Charles always got so cross when she was late. Tonight, especially, with the party at the firm, Charles was being especially obsessive about punctuality. This was an important party for Charles. Make contact with new clients. Impress the heads of department. And she...well, she had to do everything just right. Make up for her normal behaviour. All the disappointment she seemed to cause Charles...

'Here's your lunch, miss. Six pounds, please.'

Sharon fished in her purse, handing the boy standing behind the counter two five pound notes. She waited for him to return her change before turning around and walking towards a nearby empty table.

'Miss, be careful of the...!'

She had walked perhaps two steps when her heel caught on a loose floor tile, sending her sprawling. Her tray went flying, its contents sailing through the air. Sharon recognised the unmistakable sound of food hitting clothing. She closed her eyes, steeling herself for the stream of invective she knew was coming. Instead, all she heard was this.

'Oh, dear.'

Sharon lifted herself up off the floor, trying desperately to maintain as much dignity as possible. Only when she was once again at her full height, and as composed as she could manage under the circumstances, did she even look in the direction of the man (she was certain of that much from the voice) who was now wearing her lunch. The man who stood before her...Sharon had to take a moment to let her mind properly interpret what she was seeing. At first, she had thought that he was wearing pyjamas. Now that she was looking at him more closely, she saw that he was wearing the sort of clothing she'd seen on the players when Charles had actually left the television on the cricket for longer than five seconds. Well, except for the splodge of salad dressing on his left shoe and a large liquid patch which was now slowly spreading from his shirt down his trouser leg. She couldn't stop thinking how insanely impractical his clothing seemed to be for the weather outside. It was almost Christmas and he was dressed as though it were a bright spring day outside.

That wasn't what she had found truly disconcerting, however. What had bothered her was the expression on the man's face. Any normal person would have given her a look capable of rendering the RAF into ash. This man simply had a bright smile and a slightly quizzical look on his face, as if he'd been told the cafe was out of tea rather than as if he'd just had food spilled all over him. He was dabbing at his shirt with a napkin and whistling a strange, jaunty little tune. And not looking at her at all.

Sharon walked up to him. 'I am so sorry, it was completely my fault. I'm such a clumsy little git, I can barely walk in a straight line sometimes....'

The man now turned his attention to her. For just the briefest of seconds, when their eyes made contact, she thought she saw a look of profound sadness and empathy on his face. The sort of look that carried with it ages of wisdom and sacrifice. Then, the moment passed, and he was smiling at her again.

'There's nothing to apologise for, Miss...?'

'Blake. Sharon Blake. My friends call me Sharon.'

'There's nothing to apologise for, Sharon.' Cheeky! 'It was an accident. These sort of things happen.'

'But it was my fault. Let me have your address so I can send you some money to cover the cost of cleaning.'

The smile on the man's face shifted, changed slightly.

'Are you going to insist on trying to make this up to me?'

'Yes.'

He let out a mock sigh of protest. 'Very well. If you insist on doing so, I know just the thing. Have lunch with me and my friends. I'll have one of the counter staff bring you over another chef salad and a cup of coffee.' He looked down at his clothes. 'At least, I assume that's what you were having.'

Despite herself, Sharon found herself smiling.

'Tegan, Turlough, we have a guest for this afternoon's meal. This is Sharon Blake.'

Sharon looked at the two other people sharing the table with the man she had spilled her first lunch on (and you can't continue to think of him like *that!).* They didn't quite seem like the sort of people who would be friends. The man, Turlough, was wearing the blazer and tie of an English public schoolboy, a uniform which he seemed at least ten years too old for. His red hair hung in an unruly fashion on his head. He was attacking a chocolate gateau with gusto, as though he hadn't tasted or even seen food for weeks. The woman, Tegan, seemed quieter than her companions, more reserved. She was wearing a light blue sweater and jeans, and gripping a hot chocolate tightly, as though it was as much a source of warmth as a drink. Turlough grinned at her by way of greeting and resumed eating. Tegan said a brief 'Hello,' in an accent Sharon immediately recognised as Australian and went back to her hot chocolate. Sharon set down her tray on the table, wondering what exactly she had agreed to.

Turlough turned towards the gentleman and smiled. 'You were right, Doctor. This is delicious!'

So, thought Sharon, the gentleman in the strange outfit was a doctor. Perhaps he taught in University and these two were his students. Yes, that would make sense.

The Doctor interrupted her train of thought. 'So, Sharon, why don't you tell us a little about yourself?'

'Well, there's not very much to tell. I work in a boutique not far from here. I enjoy it, they treat me well, I make good money.'

Tegan now. 'Single? Married?'

'We're happy, aren't we? I mean, every couple has their problems, don't they?'

'Married. Two years now. His name is Charles. He works in an insurance firm. He's very successful, you know. His superiors all think he's wonderful. The word around the office is that he's up for a promotion.'

Sharon looked at Tegan. Tegan simply stared back at her, no visible emotion on her face. Sharon laughed nervously and went back to her lunch. The unlikely quartet continued eating and drinking for several moments in an awkward silence. The silence was eventually broken again by Tegan.

'So, when did he first start hitting you?'

'I'm sorry?'

'When did he first start hitting you?'

'Don't tell them anything, you stupid cow.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about. My husband would never do such a thing to me.'

'You're wearing a pair of dark sunglasses. It's been raining for the past week. The man on television says it's supposed to continue raining.'

Sharon stormed to her feet, a look of indignation, of supreme anger crossing her face. 'I have no idea who you are or why you feel you have the right to talk this way to me but let me assure you that you are out of your mind! My husband loves me and would never do anything like that to me, ever...'

And then she looked at The Doctor.

That look she saw earlier had returned. The look of inexpressible sadness, of heartache, of a man who had seen countless incidents of sorrow and pain first hand. A man who looked so young, yet seemed so old.

The Doctor stood up, looking Sharon straight in the eyes.

'Sharon, please. Sit down.' His voice never rose above the tone of a whisper.

Sharon couldn't stop looking at his face. His eyes seemed deeper than anything she had seen before in her life, so deep that she could lose herself in them. His smile spoke of both unbearable beauty and unspeakable tragedy. And his face.... She barely knew this man yet she felt as though she could tell him anything.

'Who have you been talking to?'

She could finally tell someone...

'You are not telling them a bloody thing!'

'Please, Sharon,' said the Doctor quietly.

Sharon sank back down in her seat, her breath coming in short ragged gasps. Her vision was starting to blur, water filling her eyes.

'I knew a girl back home,' said Tegan. 'Her name was Adele. She was involved with Johnny Hunter. Captain of the rugby team, best looking bloke in school. Every girl in class fancied him. But he only had eyes for Adele. We were all incredibly jealous, of course. And Adele used to play up to it. Used to tease us about it. We'd tease her back. It was all just in fun.'

Sharon now saw Tegan begin to lose her composure. 'One day, she came to class with a huge bruise on the right side of her face. Said she's been in an accident. Adele was always a terrible liar.

I got her to confess what had really happened. That Johnny had hit her. She said she had gotten him angry, that she had been stupid. That he had said he loved her and he was sorry and it would never happen again.'

Tears now streamed down Tegan's face. 'The next time I saw Adele was at her funeral.'

Sharon jerked her face away from Tegan's, unwilling to look at her.

That isn't me, she thought, it will never be me. It's not like that,

Charles isn't like that...

Turlough just looked at her sadly. And the Doctor...

'There are still some things about humanity I don't quite understand. When we first met just a little while ago, you were insistent on making amends for a simple accident. On giving me money for some slight damage done to articles of clothing. Why, when this is so much more important, do you refuse to do what is necessary? Why,' asked the Doctor, 'are you willing to place the value of clothes above the value of people?'

Sharon couldn't see, couldn't breath, couldn't think for crying. The Doctor had his arm around her and was murmuring to her in soft, comforting tones. Tegan and Turlough were looking at her with concern in their eyes. The other patrons were beginning to look as well.

'Look at you, you stupid cow. Everyone's staring. They're all laughing at you.'

I don't care.

'They'll think you're horrible. They'll think you're some pathetic old woman who's so desperate to hang on to her man that she'll put up with anything.'

I don't care.

'YOU STUPID BITCH!!!!!!!'

I DON'T CARE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

'It started...' Sharon began haltingly, trying to put the words together. '...Six months after we got married. Mum and Dad never approved of Charles. They certainly didn't approve of the marriage. I didn't care. I was young and in love and stupid.'

'So we managed to find a vicar who would marry us and we got married. Everything seemed to be going fine, at first. Then Charles got passed over for a promotion in the firm. He came home ranting and raving that night, talking about that Andrews git, how Andrews had stolen what should have rightfully been his. I tried as hard as I could to make him happy but nothing seemed to work. Everything I did just made him angrier.'

Sharon raised her hands to her face and slowly took the sunglasses from off of her face. The large, purple bruise seemed to almost swallow her left eye.

The sadness on Turlough's face turned to rage. 'How can anyone do something like this and still call themselves a man?'

'It's not like you think. I was late coming home from work yesterday and I brought home the wrong brand of milk from the grocer's...'

'So that makes it okay?' snapped Tegan. 'You make a mistake on the groceries so he gets to treat your face like a punching bag!'

'He said he was sorry. He said he loved me!'

'If he loved you, he wouldn't beat you!'

Sharon just sat in her seat, her thoughts tumbling about inside her head.

'Is there anywhere you can go, anyone you can get in contact with?' asked the Doctor.

'No....I don't have any friends.'

'What about your parents?' asked Tegan.

'I haven't spoken to them for two years. When I left, we.... We had a blazing row just before Charles and I got married. They're not going to speak to me.'

The Doctor laid a gentle hand on Sharon's cheek and slowly turned her face to meet his. He had back on that smile of his again, the smile that said that everything would work out in the end. He opened his other hand. Resting inside it were five one pound coins.

'How will you know,' he asked, 'unless you try?'

Sharon looked at him, tears streaming out of her eyes. 'I'm scared.'

'I know. Doing the right thing is the most frightening thing in the universe sometimes. If it weren't, everyone would do it. But, sometimes, it's the only thing you can do.'

It was just a phone.

So, why was she so scared?

It was still ringing. They weren't home. They were out somewhere shopping or celebrating. They'd forgotten all about her. Even if they hadn't, they wouldn't want to talk to her...

'Hello?'

Sharon found she could barely speak.

'Mummy?'

'Sharon?'

'It's me, mum. It's Sharon.'

'Oh god, darling, we've been so worried...'

'So,' asked Turlough as he, Tegan, and the Doctor walked down the busy street towards the alleyway where they had parked the TARDIS, 'why her?'

'What do you mean?' asked the Doctor.

'I mean, why her? What great purpose does she serve in the universal scheme of things? Does she become someone important? Save a life or something? Does her son single handedly hold off a

Dalek invasion fleet?'

Tegan's face contorted in fury. She jabbed her finger in Turlough's face. 'You,' she barked, 'are hopeless. Absolutely hopeless!' She then stormed off into the distance, her anger almost visibly trailing behind her.

'She is,' said the Doctor, 'a very ordinary woman who will go on to live an ordinary life. Nothing unusual will ever happen to her. Ever.'

'Then why...?'

'What right have we to interfere in the fates of planets if we can not spare the time for one single individual?'

For once, Turlough was speechless.

'Merry Christmas, Turlough.'

Turlough smiled in response. 'Merry Christmas, Doctor.'

Kyreth

By

Kimberly Yale and John Ostrander

The Doctor sat in the cloister of his TARDIS, his long legs crossed in meditative fashion, eyes closed and looking inwards, strands of his blonde hair hanging down over his forehead like thatch. His entire body sagged, much like the stalk of celery he wore incongruously in the red trimmed lapel of his cream frock coat. Lost in meditation, faces and names and scenes from his travels passed before his mind's eye.

Some of the scenes were bright, some were desperate, and many horrific, as friends, foes, and monsters swept before his inner eye. He kept centring on one of his companions - Adric, who perished because the man he trusted was not quick enough to save him. Now here was Tegan, another of his companions, flashing before him, teary eyed, saying she wanted to go home - that it wasn't any fun any more.

The Doctor thought to himself, 'It isn't, is it?'

Other images passed through his mind, images of himself in different incarnations, the different lives that he led. They all seemed to regard him severely.

'Feckless' was the word that came to mind. The Scientist, the Clown, the Dandy, and the Fool - they all seemed to regard him as somewhat incompetent, as less than the sum of his parts. This seemed exceptionally hard to the Doctor, especially coming from the Clown and the Fool. On the other hand, he never seemed to get along well with himself.

'We would not have done as you have done,' they seemed to be saying; 'We would have handled things much differently.' How? What would they have done that would have been different? That would have been better?

An image floated up of the Fool crouched before a chamber. Within the chamber his greatest enemies, the Daleks, a race of sociopathic mutants, were a-borning and he, the Doctor, the Fool, hesitated. The core of the Daleks were humanoids, warped and twisted by radiation in both mind and body. To kill them in this larval stage would forestall the manufacture of the Daleks but to kill them also meant committing genocide. On the one hand, to destroy the Daleks now would prevent the deaths of millions. In performing genocide, however, would he not be guilty of the same crime the Daleks would later commit? Not even crimes they had yet committed but crimes they would commit.

Another image drifts to mind, another memory, and this one very recent. The Doctor in this incarnation, gun in hand, shooting down his foes. Killing. For a good cause, certainly. But killing.

'That was never my way,' the Doctor mumbled to himself in his half dream state; 'What am I becoming?'

Another face, forming in his mind. Dark evil glare and a cynical leer. Hair pulled straight back with moustache and goatee. 'You're becoming me,' the Master says gleefully.

A voice tore through his mind. 'Doctor! Wake up! You are needed! Come at once!'

The Doctor's blue eyes popped open like great circles, his trance disrupted. Startled, he searched his mind. He knew that voice!

'Borusa?' he breathed. Cardinal Borusa, a Time Lord, the Doctor's mentor and friend as well as President of the Council that governed Gallifrey and the Time Lords.

The Doctor uncrossed his long legs and, getting quickly to his feet, walked rapidly to the control room of his TARDIS, muttering to himself as he went. 'I can't go back to Gallifrey,' he said aloud and then corrected himself; 'How can you fail your old friend? It seems to me you've done enough of that lately.'

With that he burst into the control room of his space-time machine and punched in the co-

ordinates for his home planet on the large octagonal control unit. 'Ten, zero,
eleven, zero zero by zero two,' the fair-haired man muttered to himself and paused. It was an old TARDIS and a particularly cranky one. When first the Doctor had run away from his own people, he had simply selected the one at hand a Type 40 with more than a few flaws which he never seemed to get around to fixing. The chameleon circuit for example, which should have allowed it to blend in with its surroundings anywhere it landed, defied repair. Still, this cranky old TARDIS and the Doctor had formed an attachment over the years. True, it missed some of its time and space co-ordinates in its destinations and you could never be quite sure where you were going to land-or when-but the Doctor was rather fond of it nevertheless.

He pushed the starting lever, leaned down and patted the console, saying, 'Now, for once in your life, old girl, try to be discreet. Not only discreet but careful. Wouldn't want to materialise in the Castellan's office; he might not appreciate the interruption.'

In response, the central pylons of the control unit began to slowly pump up and down as the TARDIS itself began to wheeze like a grampus.

The Castellan of Gallifrey, a short and stout Time

Lord named Evidon, was about to be interrupted anyway. He was, at the moment, in the Chancellery Guard, the technological hub of Gallifrey, where rows upon rows of unfathomable machinery guarded and protected and powered the planet. Evidon, whose duties included the overall security of the Citadel and the machinery that gave the Gallifreyans the ability to span time and space, stood with a radpath technician, scowling at the work plans they held.

'As you can see, the program needs a major revision. If we don't we're vulnerable to...' he said and then there was the sound of someone clearing their throat behind him. 'Now what is it?' he muttered and then changed his expression. 'Chancellor Kelke!' Evidon blinked and then smiled, 'What a pleasant surprise!'

Kelke was a tall wintry man with hooded eyes and a usually flinty expression who, at the moment, seemed awkward and ill at ease. Evidon nodded with his head to the radpath technician who without a murmur, discreetly exited. Kelke nodded approvingly.

A very well mannered young woman, Evidon. What is she? Prydonian? Patrexes? It's so rare to find deference to authority in youth these days.'

'Too true,' Evidon sighed. He knew the Chancellor was very old fashioned in his views. According to Kelke, everything had been going downhill since the days of his youth and his first regeneration. The Castellan made a secret wish for Kelke to get on with whatever he wanted; there was a great deal demanding Evidon's attention at the moment.

Kelke seemed not to be totally unaware. 'Are you revamping the Capitol's surveillance system?' he asked, nodding to the plans Evidon held.

The Castellan nodded. 'Yes, I'm hoping a complete analysis might reveal why the Capitol's been plagued by equipment malfunctions lately.'

Kelke nodded in approval. 'I knew the Supreme Council displayed excellent judgement is selecting you as the Castellan.'

Evidon grimaced; if the Chancellor wasn't going to get to the point on his own, he would have to do it for him.

'What brings you to my bailiwick, Chancellor?' he asked abruptly.

Kelke's face flushed for a moment and he pursed his thin lips. Ordinarily a very haughty man, even with his fellow Time Lords, and proud of his position as Chancellor, Kelke seemed at that moment to be most uncomfortable. Was there just a touch of crimson in his sunken cheeks, Evidon wondered, and then thought he knew why Kelke had come.

Kelke, staring at the floor, murmured, 'I'd like to thank you for your tact and discretion regarding my son and that... incident.'

As well you might be, Evidon thought, given that the 'incident' might have gotten the boy tossed out of the Academy, but aloud the Castellan only replied, 'He needs to choose his company more carefully, that's all. Besides, I think discretion is a trait essential to the execution of a Castellan's duties.' Here he gave Kelke a reassuring small smile, one that the other man gratefully accepted.

'I agree wholeheartedly, ' Kelke sighed in relief. 'I would like to celebrate the harmony of our opinions by inviting you to dine with us this evening.'

Evidon's eyebrows raised a fraction of an inch. Kelke was feeling grateful and the reputation of his table was excellent. Evidon was also enough of a politician to appreciate the value of being allied with the second most powerful man on Gallifrey. 'I'd be delighted,' the Castellan responded with enthusiasm; 'What time -?'

The question was delayed by a commotion Evidon spotted at the Temporal Scan Console. That was trouble! It was here that all approaches to Gallifrey, both spatial and temporal, were monitored. Without further comment, Evidon crossed to the operator, followed by Kelke, and asked the co-ensign to report.

'An unidentified capsule has just materialised at the outer edge of our scan, Castellan.'

Kelke sputtered, 'Preposterous!'

Evidon ignored the Chancellor and ordered a molecular composition scan of the object.

'A TARDIS?' Kelke asked.

Evidon grunted. 'Co-Ensign, continue tracking its movements and report directly to me.' Turning to Kelke, he added, 'Chancellor, I'm afraid our dinner engagement must be postponed.'

Kelke attempted to shrug it off, saying, 'Probably a Time Lord returning from an authorised research project.' Then, thinking twice, he quickly added, 'If not, the Supreme Council needs to be informed!' He hurried off to be the first to do so.

Evidon pulled at his pendulous lower lip with his thumb and forefinger as he pondered. He knew he hadn't authorised a TARDIS permit to a Time Lord since he assumed office and all capsules were accounted for - save those that had been stolen by renegades. The re-appearance of any of them always meant trouble.

The Co-Ensign reported the sensors had confirmed the initial readings - the object was, indeed, a TARDIS. Evidon nodded and then activated a communication circuit: 'Attention, all systems! By direct command of the Castellan, establish an Amber Alert within the Capitol. Someone has gained unauthorised possession of a TARDIS. Communications Officer, locate and inform Commander Andred of the Chancellery Guard and ask him to meet me in my office.'

At that moment, The Doctor noticed the flashing light on his console and frowned at it. 'An Amber Alert? Didn't this happen before?'

Back in the Chancellery Guard, Evidon peered over the co-ensign's shoulder at the Temporal Scan Console.

'I think I should be able to try for a visualisation, Castellan.'

Evidon grunted and the co-ensign fiddled with his controls.

'I get the strangest feeling someone is looking at me,' the Doctor said to himself, fiddling with his own controls.

Evidon and the co-ensign caught the glimpse of the TARDIS in question for a moment and then it de-materialised back into the Temporal Vortex.

'Track it,' the Castellan instructed; 'I want to know the exact moment it comes out of the Vortex. I'll be in my office with Commander Andred.'

Whoever it was, they were attempting to sneak into

Gallifrey. For the Castellan, that was enough to damn them.

In a deserted suite in the Presidential palace, there was a phantom wheezing sound that got louder and louder. A box like shape began to appear in the corner of the room

with a bright blue light flashing from its roof. When it was done, there was in the corner of that room a bright blue square kiosk a little over six feet tall with the word POLICE BOX prominently over its door.

The door swung inward, the Doctor stuck his head out and promptly sneezed violently. He stepped out and dimly peered through watery eyes at the room, a large stone chamber with cloths over the furniture, decorated in the style of the old Thesaurian Empire, and thickly coated in dust.

The Doctor turned back and addressed the TARDIS petulantly. 'I asked for discretion, not obscurity!' The Doctor closed the door and locked it, fished for a handkerchief, blew his nose, wiped his eyes, and then began to walk out of the room. 'Welcome home!' he muttered to himself. Sometimes he wondered why he bothered.

In the Chancellery Guard, a lowly co-ensign was suddenly very pleased with himself and, pressing the communication circuit, requested a direct clearance to Castellan Evidon.

At that moment, Commander Andred of the Chancellery Guard was standing in front of Evidon in the man's office. Andred was a young man, younger than the Commander of the Guard should have been, but had earned his rank during the invasion of Gallifrey that had been masterminded by Evidon's predecessor. He stood at attention, his red helmet snapped smartly in the crook between his right arm and red uniform, and his left hand in the small of his back, under his white cape, holding a red and orange cylinder there.

Evidon was addressing the communications circuit on his desk. 'You're sure of the readings, co-ensign?' The voice from his desk was absolutely certain. Frowning, Evidon told him to keep an eye on it. 'I want to know, atom by atom, where that TARDIS is at all times!' He then turned to Andred and snapped out orders.

'Commander, the unauthorised TARDIS has landed in a deserted suite in the same sector as the President's chambers. Take a squad of men with you, secure President Borusa's safety, and capture the intruder.'

Evidon stared at the younger man. Was that a smile on his face? And why hadn't he left?

Andred said very simply, 'Castellan, I predict that the TARDIS will be a Type 40 and its occupant is no enemy but a true friend of Gallifrey.' He stepped forward and placed the capsule he had hidden behind his back on the desk in front of Evidon. 'Forgive me, Castellan, but I took the liberty of removing his personal cylinder for your personal perusal after the Communications Officer briefed me.'

Evidon stared at the cylinder dumbly, 'Whose cylinder, Commander?'

The man was smiling! 'The Doctor's cylinder, sir.'

Evidon glared at the Guard Commander. The nerve of the man! 'Facts cannot be usurped by supposition!' He harrumphed and then, muttering, 'Impertinence!' he picked up the capsule and examined it.

A Prydonian,' he muttered as if that explained a great deal and then tossed the capsule back on the desk.

'Whoever our visitor is, Commander,' he said evenly, 'this visit is unauthorised. Secure him.'

Andred saluted smartly and briskly headed out the door, spurred in part by his duty but more at the prospect of seeing an old friend.

The Doctor stuck his head out of the door and glanced up and down the corridor. It was wide enough for two people to walk abreast, made of a grey stone and vaulted about ten feet above the ground, lit by light sconces at regular intervals. There were no windows. The Doctor found it distinctly drab, dreary and depressing - which is how he found most of the Citadel which was one of the reasons he'd left it in the first place.

Finding the corridor empty, he frowned. Which direction to go? Memory didn't serve. He then stuck the tip of his index finger in his mouth and hung it in the motionless air.

Despite the lack of wind current, the gesture seemed to settle his mind and the Doctor headed down the corridor, telling himself, That way.'

Two steps later he pivoted and walked rapidly up the corridor in the opposite direction, away from the sounds of marching feet. Ducking into a side corridor, he glanced back long enough to see the trio of guards come to a halt in front of the room he had just left. 'Pesky guards!' he murmured irritably and then hurried up the corridor. If he had looked closer, the Doctor might have recognised the leader of these guards as his old friend Andred.

The Commander nodded in the direction that the Doctor had gone. 'You men proceed to President Borusa's chambers.'

They saluted smartly and were gone. Playing a hunch, Andred opened the door of the room, looked in, and smiled. Then he punched some numbers into his wrist communicator and was connected to the Castellan.

'I've located the TARDIS, sir; it's in an unused suite quite close to President Borusa's chambers. I'm having the chamber sealed and I've sent two guards to stand outside the President's chambers.'

There was a pause before Evidon cleared his throat. 'I assume the TARDIS is a Type 40?'

Andred tried hard to keep the grin out of his voice.

'Yes, Castellan. The chameleon circuit is still in need of repair.'

Evidon harrumphed. 'Keep me abreast of developments,' he ordered, 'and you might warn Borusa. Oh, and order a set of trionic ident keys brought to the TARDIS. I may need it to be searched.'

'I'll see to it,' replied Andred smartly but kept his accompanying thought to himself, 'but only if I have to, Doctor.'

Evidon rubbed an enormous eyebrow; it looked as if he was petting some furry caterpillar that had taken up residence over his eye. Signing, he pressed the communication circuit again and was connected to Archives.

'I want a biodata file brought to my office immediately... Yes, I know it's highly irregular - two in one day. I accept full responsibility for its removal.

The name?' Evidon's eyes squinted as he rasped out the name. 'The Master.'

The Doctor continued his brisk walk down the twining corridor, always with the sound of the guards feet a turn or two behind him. Then he found himself in the middle of a long corridor with a double set of doors and no turning to duck around and the feet were getting very close behind him indeed. Without a moment's hesitation, the Doctor slipped in through the double set of doors and closed them behind him. The two guards marched up to the door and took up sentry positions just in front of it.

Inside, the Doctor crouched with his ear to the door, not at all happy with the situation, when a voice boomed out from behind him: 'What is the meaning of this intrusion?'

The Doctor spun around and found himself looking at his old teacher and mentor, now President of the Supreme Council of the Time Lords. A square face, with sharp bright eyes that seemed to miss nothing and spoke of deep water behind them. The thinning hair was brushed straight back and further accentuated his high forehead. The President disdained the tall collar of his college while not in official functions and his robe was simple and his gestures were economical. This was a man who thought before he spoke and reflected on what was said.

The Doctor's face lit up with a wide boyish delighted smile to see him. 'Borusa! Fancy meeting you here!'

Borusa allowed a slight smile to tweak the end of his wide mouth. 'Where else should I be? These are the President's chambers!'

The Doctor's long legs quickly crossed the small distance between them and he was shaking his mentor's hand.

'Well-met, Borusa! And a pleasure!'

Borusa looked the Doctor up and down critically, nodding his head. The figure, as always, was eccentrically dressed if not in as outlandish a fashion as in some of his previous incarnations. The long striped pyjama trousers seemed to favour the same colours he used to wear in a scarf.

His red lined white shirt had a question mark preposterously stitched on each collar point. Still, the sweater he wore over it - something that had been described as a 'cricket sweater' - was of a pleasing white hue and the red and blue piping of its V-neck complimented the piping the long tailed cream coloured Regency styled frock coat he wore. All in all, not as bad as it might be. The boyish face seemed incongruous with the age and intellect of the man the President had known; if anything, he appeared as young now than when he was Borusa's student. The eyes, however, proclaimed the man - alive with life, humour, curiosity, and intelligence. For all that, there was a darkness at the edge of that intelligence and a strained manner to the Doctor that Borusa had not noticed before.

'I neglected to comment upon your latest regeneration the last time I saw you,' Borusa told him; 'It's quite a considerable improvement. The nose especially. Since you have had the temerity to barge in here unannounced, you have no choice but to join me for dinner.'

The Doctor grinned. 'A just punishment, Borusa. I...' He suddenly broke off. His head unexpectedly had started to throb and the room whirled briefly before his eyes. The Doctor started to stumble and caught himself before he could fall.

Borusa looked at him with concern. 'Doctor, are you alright?'

The other man shook his head, sending the fine flaxen hair flying. Taking a deep breath and then smiling once more, the Doctor assured Borusa he was fine. 'Come. We need to catch up.'

Borusa prepared a simple meal himself and mostly listened as the Doctor gave him an abbreviated account of his activities while they ate. Borusa's rooms were large and, for Gallifrey, airy. The walls were covered with dark wood as were the heavy table and chairs surrounding it. Dark stone was inlaid here and there as were the same style lighting sconces used in the corridors. The main room, where the Doctor and the President now chatted, was Borusa's reception room; a wide archway led to the private rooms and studies he kept more in the back.

A chirping sound from a small communication panel near the door interrupted their conversation. With a sigh, Borusa rose, walked to the panel and pressed a button. 'Yes?' There was no reply. Frowning, Borusa fiddled with the controls as the Doctor came up and joined him.

'What's wrong?' asked the Doctor.

'The Capitol's been bedevilled by random power disruptions and malfunctions lately. I've asked Castellan Evidon to investigate the matter.' Borusa threw up his hands in frustration. 'Ah! I can do nothing with it!'

The Doctor sidled in next to the President, asking, 'With your permission?' Borusa gestured with his hands indicating anything that the Doctor could do would be appreciated. The Doctor, biting his lower lip, studied the panel very careful and then banged it with his fist. The circuit crackled into life. 'Old Earth engineering trick,' the Doctor grinned.

Borusa smiled in amusement. The Doctor seemed always full of tricks. 'I must remember it for future use,' Borusa told him and then became serious again as he addressed the circuit. 'Sorry for the delay; my circuit went dead. State your business, if you please.'

The voice crackling through the failing circuit could barely be made out. 'Castellan Evidon has authorised an Amber Alert, your Excellency. An unauthorised individual has gained control of a TARDIS and has landed in the Capitol. May I come in to discuss the security protocols the Castellan wants you to follow?'

Borusa gave a nod with his head and the Doctor slipped behind the archway leading into the dining room. 'You may enter,' he told the man on the other side of the doors.

Andred marched in quickly, cradled his helmet and then reported excitedly. 'Excellency, it's the Doctor! He's returned to Gallifrey! I found his TARDIS in that room he used when he was President.'

The Doctor shook his head. 'I was President?' he thought to himself; 'You'd think I'd remember something like that!'

Andred continued. 'I haven't found him yet but I intend to before one of my patrols hauls him off to an interrogation by Evidon.'

The Doctor draped himself in the archway and smiled at Andred.' I agree,' he said, 'Interrogations tend to upset one's digestion terribly. Hello, Andred.'

Evidon at that moment was beginning a conversation with Chancellor Kelke who had just bustled into his office. 'Thank you for coming so promptly, Chancellor,' Evidon said briskly. 'I need your advice but before I can ask it I need you to review those two biodata extracts there on my desk.'

Kelke picked up both cylinders and frowned as he read their inscriptions. The Master? The Doctor? I don't understand, Evidon.'

'Read them,' Evidon insisted; 'read them both because the occupant of the TARDIS that landed in the Capitol is a renegade Time Lord. The Doctor.'

The Doctor, in the meantime, was just getting caught up with Andred after a great deal of laughter and handshaking and 'good to see you' sort of things. Andred had just gotten done telling the Doctor about Leela - once one of the Doctor's companions, and now And red's wife.

'She'll be sorry she missed you, Doctor,' Andred smiled.

Borusa just shook his head in wonderment. 'I can't believe that you and your sav - that is, your wife actually spend time outside the Capitol.' Borusa's wonderment was based on the fact that, outside of the few cities on Gallifrey, the planet was quite wild or desolate.

Leela, coming from a more primitive planet was herself a warrior woman and something of a scandal to more conservative elements of Gallifreyan society. The Doctor allowed himself a smile at the memory of her. 'Knowing Leela, I rather think she would insist on spending time outside.'

Andred shrugged. 'Mutual agreement,' he replied and the warmth in his voice bespoke the deep love in his heart for his savage wife. There was a glint in his smile. 'We both find the outer world a welcome change from the endless pomp and ceremony of the Capitol.'

Borusa simply shuddered. The Doctor stretched his long limbs and made to get up from the couch where he'd been sitting. 'Speaking of pomp and ceremony, I suppose it's time for the obligatory showdown with the Sheriff.' The two others looked at him blankly. 'I mean the Castellan,' he smiled and then turned to the Guard Commander. 'Am I under arrest, Andred?'

'Certainly not!' It was Borusa who spoke and with some asperity. 'The Doctor is my honoured, personal guest, and I'm sure Castellan Evidon respects diplomatic protocol.'

Andred, rising to his feet, nodded gravely and formally. 'I will personally inform the Castellan that you have assumed responsibility for the Doctor.' Then, with a knowing smile, he added, "It's the only explanation Evidon will accept!'

Andred saluted and left, telling the two guards simply that they were to remain in the corridor, guarding the President's door, until further notice.

The Doctor turned to Borusa looking very serious. 'The visit has been pleasant, old friend, but don't you think it's time you told me exactly why you summoned me here? We don't have to tell Evidon but it might be useful if I knew.'

Borusa stared at the Doctor blankly. 'I beg your pardon?' was all he said.

The Doctor sighed deeply and then continued with a slight sharpness. 'I received a telepathic message from you begging me to return to the Capitol. Great danger, peril to
Gallifrey, that sort of thing.'

Borusa just stared at the Doctor and then slowly said, 'Doctor, you have me at a disadvantage. I did not summon you. There is nothing wrong on Gallifrey.'

To which the Doctor said... nothing. He just sat back and stared at Borusa with confusion in his bright blue eyes.

Castellan Evidon was mulling over the report that

Andred had just given him as well as the contents of the Doctor's biodata cylinder. So the President was making the Doctor his personal guest? Well, rank did have privileges, Evidon supposed. 'Since we know where the intruder is, cancel the order for the ident keys. Maintain your watch on the TARDIS and the President's chambers.'

Andred seemed shocked. 'But he's not an intruder, Castellan. He's the Doctor and, furthermore, he is the President's guest!'

'I do not feel the need to explain my orders, Commander!' Evidon shot back. 'I only expect them carried out! You are dismissed!'

On Andred's way out he passed Kelke who was entering, holding the biodata cylinders. Andred's lips compressed to a thin line; he knew Kelke's ambitions and they included the President's chair. It was plain the Doctor was going to become a political problem now.

Andred gave a curt nod to Kelke and continued on his way while the Chancellor arced a haughty eyebrow. 'Insolent pup!' Kelke muttered as he entered Evidon's chamber.

Evidon shrugged. 'Good at his job. He discovered that our intruder was the Doctor.'

Kelke set down the cylinder on the desk and peremptorily sat himself in a chair. Gesturing at the biodata, he demanded to know why the Doctor hadn't yet been arrested.

'On what formal charge, Chancellor?' replied Evidon, lifting his own massive eyebrows a quarter inch.

'You read the file. Rebellion, yes, and theft of a TARDIS; flight, apprehension, a trial and a sentence to exile to Sol 3 in the Mutters Spiral. Sentence commuted by request of the Celestial Intervention Agency for aid given during the Omega crisis.'

Kelke waved it all aside. He had an issue and didn't like it contaminated with facts. He argued, 'Need I remind you, Evidon, what has occurred on subsequent visits? Chaos and disorder always follow in the wake of this renegade. Have you forgotten the damage to property, the lives lost? The disruption of our serenity? The Doctor is a clear menace to our society.'

The Castellan rubbed his lower lip. There was something to what the Chancellor said. Still, he had to know how far the Chancellor was willing to push the issue. 'Assuming I agree with you,' he said slowly. 'There is only one way I can prefer charges; petition the Supreme Council to convene a Board on Inquiry on the Doctor to determine his suitability to remain a Time Lord using his entire life - or lives - as the basis for decision. That way, even charges for which he has been acquitted or pardoned may be considered anew.'

Kelke was quiet a moment. 'Borusa will strenuously object,' he opined.

'With good reason, Kelke - I'd be setting a dangerous legal precedent. No one has ever been charged before in such a manner and I'm not sure which of us could defend ourselves from it.'

Kelke rose and assumed a formal stance, nose slightly in the air. 'You can't allow any personal misgivings to affect your duty as Castellan, Evidon. If you hesitate, you might be accused of indecision and irresponsibility.'

Probably, Evidon thought sourly, from the man standing in front of me.

Kelke started to leave and threw his last words back over his shoulder towards Evidon. 'You'll have my full support in the Supreme Council, of course.'

Of course, thought Evidon, as long as it is politically advantageous. There were moments when Evidon intensely disliked the politics of Gallifrey. Still, there was something to be said for this manoeuvre. Some of the Doctor's actions remained unexplained, especially in regards to the Master. If those two were ever to form an alliance...

Evidon shook off the thought with a shudder.

Whatever the politics involved might be, there was a clear and present danger connected with the Doctor, for which the Doctor must be made to answer. The Doctor's sudden re-appearance on Gallifrey and the malfunctions in the Capitol were some how linked. Evidon was sure of it. Now he had to find proof - and the reason why.

The Doctor, at that moment, was pacing Borusa's chambers, trying to work out answers of his own. He let out a long sigh.

Borusa was tired of watching him pace. Hoping the Doctor had arrived at some answer, he simply demanded, 'Well?'

The Doctor allowed a flicker of a smile to cross his face. 'A well's a deep subject, Excellency.'

Borusa frowned impatiently. Telepathic impersonation is hardly a joking matter, Doctor.'

The Doctor nodded, passing a hand through his blond hair. 'I appreciate that, Borusa. The main concerns are who impersonated you - and why. Why was I summoned back to Gallifrey? Why use your voice? There is only one person I can think who would have a mind insidious enough to launch such a scheme - the Master. If he has regained his freedom, there are some old scores to settle between us.' The Doctor's voice became very hard. 'Scores to be settled once and for all!'

Borusa studied his old friend. He had known him for a long time, through all his previous incarnations and yet there was a hardness to him here, almost a ruthlessness that he found hard to reconcile with the Doctor he knew. There was something more - an exhaustion that seemed to emanate from his very atoms.

'Doctor, perhaps you should give a thought of ending your vagabond existence and returning permanently here to Gallifrey. You seem... not yourself. Perhaps you are tired.'

The Doctor threw himself back in his chair and slouched in it, one hand absently swiping his hair off his forehead. He sat there silently a few moments as if once again looking at himself with his inner eye. Finally he sighed and murmured, "I'm not tired, Borusa. It's more than that. For the first time in my lives I feel... disillusioned. It's... not fun anymore, Borusa.'

That was the last thing that Borusa expected to hear from the Doctor and now he was genuinely alarmed. His request for the Doctor to remain here in his chambers until the Surgeon General could examine him were impatiently swept aside as the Doctor got to his feet and headed for the door.

'If the Master is behind all this, if he is here on Gallifrey, then I must get busy. You've mentioned the mysterious power disruptions and the random malfunctions. What if they're not so random? What if they are the hand of the Master at work? There's not a moment to lose!' Reaching the door, the Doctor swung it wide open and stopped in his tracks. There in the door frame stood Chancellor Evidon, flanked by the two Chancellery Guards Andred had left in the corridor.

'Ah, you must be the Doctor,' Evidon nodded at him: 'I am Castellan Evidon, here to see the President on urgent business.'

The Doctor smiled ingenuously and put his hands behind him and then bounced on the balls of his feet once.

'Delighted to meet you,' he babbled quickly, 'absolutely delighted. Such a pleasure. Please don't let me stand in your way. I was just on my way out.'

Evidon put up a massive hand with the palm flat against the Doctor's chest and did not smile anymore. 'I suggest you remain, Doctor. The business I am here to discuss with the President is you.' To Borusa, the Castellan continued, 'In accordance with Article 47, I ask for an inquiry to determine his fitness to remain a Time Lord.' To the Doctor, he merely added, 'You are under arrest pending arraignment of charges.'

Borusa was outraged and said so; the Castellan was implacable and remained so.

The Doctor was deeply, deeply suspicious. Had he discovered the Master's hand at work already? In fact, the more he looked at Evidon, the more convinced he became and demanded, 'Are you your own man, Castellan, or merely a puppet?'

Evidon coloured. He felt a little like Kelke's catspaw and the Doctor's question seemed directed at that. How could he possibly know? The Castellan blustered, 'You're in no position to question me, Doctor!'

The Doctor was now convinced. Evidon's shame revealed everything! He was in cahoots with the Master! His eyes ablaze, the Doctor took a threatening step towards the Castellan. 'You needn't bandy words with me! Who put you up to this?'

Evidon swiftly removed a palm-sized device from his belt, aimed it at the Doctor, and pressed the controls. A conical blue-grey ray emanated from it and froze the Doctor in almost in mid step. The field containing the Doctor remained even after the Castellan released the trigger.

Borusa frowned and reprimanded the Castellan, telling him there was no need to activate a stasis field around his client.

'Your client?' Evidon repeated, dumbfounded.

The President nodded with an air of cool authority.

'Article 47 recommends expert council for a Time Lord facing a Board of Inquiry and frankly -'

'Your expertise in jurisprudence is well known,' conceded Evidon; 'Very well. I'm holding you personally responsible for his conduct, Excellency. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must notify Chancellor Kelke and the rest of the Supreme Council.'

Commander Andred attracted his attention that moment by entering the President's quarters.

Evidon regarded him evenly and said with only a trace of steel in his voice. 'Commander Andred! What are you doing here?'

Andred covered quickly. 'Routine check of the two guardsmen I left here.'

'Ah!' the Castellan said mildly; 'Your communicator is broken? Never mind. Commander, the President has made himself the Doctor's legal advisor. You'll remain here and personally escort him to the Panopticon when the Supreme Council meets. I have restrained the Doctor within the stasis field.' Evidon handed the control unit to Andred. 'Keep him in it until otherwise instructed.' With that, Evidon stationed the guards outside the chamber once more and left, closing the door behind him.

Borusa sighed and sat in a chair. 'The man is too clever. If you deactivate that field, as he obviously expects you to do, he may be able to indict us both for collusion.'

Andred fingered the Stasis device impatiently. 'I have to do it anyway, Excellency. The Doctor has a right to know. The Capitol's rife with rumours that Rassilon's Rubric will be invoked for a traitor Time Lord.'

Borusa was appalled and demanded, 'How can they possibly be preparing a charge of treason?'

'They've compared bio cam cylinders. They seem to find evidence of the Doctor acting in collusion with the Master.'

Borusa felt ill. 'Treason and Rassilon's Rubric. Evidon isn't bluffing. The Doctor is in very real danger.'

The situation was taken out of their hands by suddenly becoming much worse. The energy field around the Doctor started to change colour, first to a blue then to a yellow and finally to a bright red as an electronic scream started to build from within, emanating seemingly from the Doctor himself. Andred and Borusa both covered their ears and averted their eyes, so painful was the combination of light and sound.

'What is going on?' shouted Andred to the President and had to repeat his question before the older Time Lord could understand it.

'I think the Doctor is trying to dispel the Stasis

Field! The fool! The mental stress will kill him!' The electronic scream continued in ferocity. The control device that Andred held grew too hot to hold and then exploded in a shower of sparks. The field holding the Doctor erupted in a display of phosphorescent colour before giving way to a pure brightness and surging outwards. The force of it knocked both Andred and Borusa to the ground, upset furniture and shattered electronics, forcing the doors off their hinges and flattening the guards. And still the banshee wail continued until, finally, it faded off to a whisper and died.

Lifting their heads, Andred and Borusa found the Doctor lying in a heap on the ground, his lips alone moving. Painfully, Andred crawled over to the Doctor. The Time Lord lay there, sweating profusely, breathing only with difficulty, his voice barely able to be heard as he gasped, 'Danger... the Master... heard a voice warning me, asking for help... Matrix!'

Evidon entered the room at a run and stood looking.at the ruin of the room around him. Finding the President behind an overturned table, Evidon quickly helped him to get to his feet. 'What has happened here?' he demanded. 'I wasn't halfway to my office when I heard that high-pitched wail!'

Kelke chose that moment to stride into the

President's chambers as well, ready to be outraged. 'Yes, by Rassilon, what is going on here? Alarms are going off all over the Citadel! Systems are malfunctioning and flickering. What have you done, Borusa? What has he done?' Kelke pointed an accusing finger at the prone figure of the Doctor.

If looks could kill, the look Borusa was giving Kelke would have crucified him. 'It is more a question of what is being done to the Doctor than what he is doing. By the way,
I am quite all right. Thank you both for asking.'

Andred silently got up and put a chair upright and helped Borusa sit in it. The older man was only bruised but looked terribly grim. The Doctor was starting to twitch and convulse, his long limbs jerking spasmodically as he twisted from side to side. As he did so, his cries were echoed in the systems and devices through Gallifrey. Gradually, as his spasms subsided, so did the agony of the machines. Borusa gripped the arms of his chairs until his knuckles were white and his long face was ashen.

To Evidon he snapped, 'Would you please now bring the Surgeon General here to attend the Doctor before everything falls apart?'

Evidon just stared at Borusa. 'Are you saying that the eruptions in the systems are tied to the Doctor?'

'They are being caused by him!' crowed Kelke as the others turned to look at him and he pointed an accusing finger at Borusa; 'You knew it! That's why you brought him here, why you have made him a guest! You're in a conspiracy with him to destroy Gallifrey!'

Borusa stood and his growing anger rose with him as he confronted Kelke. It was a hard, magnificent anger and one that Kelke found hard to face. 'Your allegations are irresponsible and, should you make them before the Supreme Council, I will break you,' he sternly told Kelke. Borusa turned then to address Evidon. 'The Doctor was President before me, however briefly, during the attempted Sontaran invasion. As a result, he was psionically tied to the Matrix.' The Matrix was the heart of the A.P.C. Net, the conjunction of all the great minds of Gallifrey, preserved electronically after their final regeneration.

Andred felt confused. 'I thought the connection was severed when the Doctor ended the invasion and gave up the Presidency. So far as I know, he doesn't even remember ever having been President, your Excellency.'

'Your words condemn him with every syllable,' blustered Kelke; 'If he does retain a connection with the Matrix, then it's obvious he is the one causing the system malfunctions here in the Citadel!'

'You're a fool, Kelke!' Borusa spat out at him. 'Your every syllable is proving that! I believe, and have believed it since he came here, that the Doctor is suffering from kyreth !'

'All Time Lords pass through kyreth, Your Excellency,' Evidon protested. 'A brief period of intense psychological assessment of our existence. A realignment of our core beings after several re-incarnations. Mine was not especially traumatic.'

'We take the process for granted because our training in detachment counterbalances the doubt and anxiety kyreth produces,' Borusa argued. 'Also, we usually don't burn up our lives as quickly as the Doctor does. His accumulative experiences garnered during his travels have triggered a kyreth fraught with wild fluctuations.'

Kelke understood immediately. 'With his ties to the Matrix, the A.P C. Net is echoing his mental convulsions!'

Borusa nodded in grim satisfaction. 'Perhaps you aren't a complete fool after all, Kelke!'

Kelke, all icy authority, turned and gestured to the guards, snapping his fingers and then pointing at the prone figure of the Doctor. 'Guards! By the authority vested in me, I command you - for the good of Gallifrey - to shoot and kill the Doctor!'

Andred, with a cry of defiance, interposed himself between the guards and his friend. 'You'll do no such thing! I forbid it!' he barked.

The guards stood there indecisively, looking between their commander and the Chancellor, caught between conflicting orders.

'Insolent pup!' roared Kelke at Andred. 'How dare you? I am the Chancellor here, not you!' To the guards he gave a withering glance and repeated his orders to kill the Doctor.

This time it was Borusa who stopped them.

'Stop this at once!' he thundered and all eyes went to him as he advanced on Kelke, growling. 'Have you gone completely mad, Chancellor? Or is it you fail to understand what you are trying to do?'

Evidon eased his way into the conversation as a buffer. Both Time Lords were proud and haughty men; backed into a corner, Kelke might do or say any stupid thing, in Evidon's estimation. He might even order the guards to arrest the President. 'The Doctor is still connected to the A.P.C. Net, Chancellor,' he murmured gently.

Kelke immediately turned on Evidon, his nostrils flaring and his eyebrows lowering. 'I am aware of that!' he growled through clenched teeth. 'And that, coupled with the Doctor's kyreth, makes it imperative that we sunder that connection before it kills us all! This is not a matter of personal animus! What I do, I do for the good of Gallifrey!'

Rassilon help us, he really believes that, thought Evidon. Aloud, he only added, 'Killing the Doctor while his mind is actively in the Matrix might mean that his mind would permanently remain there, in kyreth, with no way back. Is that something we really want?'

From Kelke's expression, it was obvious that this possibility - which had already occurred to everyone else in the room - had not occurred to him. It staggered him so much that he was left at a loss of words for which Evidon was eternally grateful.

'Perhaps we should have the Surgeon General attend to the Doctor and see if he can keep him relatively quiet while we determine how best to proceed,' Evidon suggested.

Borusa nodded in quick agreement and dispatched one of the guards to fetch the Surgeon General as the communications system now seemed permanently disabled.

Evidon then studied the relatively young features of the Doctor, watching as small spasms worked their way across his face. He read sorrow and joy and despair and a dozen other emotions flitting past and the Castellan wondered about who this rogue Time Lord - the Doctor - really was and what forces drove him and what thoughts and nightmares and hallucinations now beset him, deep within the matrix of the A.P.C. Net. The biodata contained only facts and that was insufficient to explain the man; this Time Lord seemed utterly alien to the Castellan.

'Who are you, Doctor?' Evidon whispered softly. 'Deep down, who are you really?'

Gradually, the Doctor became aware of himself and of his surroundings but he was not where he thought he ought to be. At the moment, he wasn't quite sure where that was but he was pretty sure this wasn't it. The ground, walls and ceilings seemed to be

made of pulsating grey, mauve and taupe cells, each one the size of his hand outstretched. Electrical impulses occasionally raced back and forth between these cells and up the tunnel-like corridors that stretched away from where he was.

The Doctor scratched the back of his head. 'I feel like I've been on the Tilt-A-Whirl at Coney Island,' he muttered to no one in particular.

A disembodied voice, female in tone but neutral and aloof, called out to him. 'Greetings, Doctor - or should I say Excellency? I am sorry for the deceptions and the rudeness of your summoning but I had to bring you to the one place where you might recall your right to that title - the interface between your cerebral cortex where a psycho-telepathic link has been preserved between us.'

The Doctor, now standing, glances around with bright blue eyes and a guarded expression on his face. 'And you are...?'

'Touch the cell on your right, Doctor, and you will remember.'

The Doctor located the cell in question, it seemed to have a great number of electric relays arcing through it. Gingerly, he reached out and touched the nucleus. The result was a cascade of memories assaulting him and the feeling he had just shaken hands with an electric cattle prod. The Doctor gasped, cried out, and then pulled away. With it, he pulled away the full awareness of his prior connection with the A.P.C. Net and his former presidency which had been wiped from his mind.

'I am a part of you as you are a part of me, Doctor,' the voice said crisply.

The Doctor was still gasping and held his throbbing hand. 'I see... have you learned to make tea yet?' he shuddered.

The Matrix almost sound amused. 'Have you fixed your chameleon circuit yet?'

The Doctor managed a little smile that finished as a wince. The pain was subsiding and he was able to think and speak more clearly. 'Is there a reason you've lured me here? I suppose the message of impending doom was your idea.'

'There is danger here, Doctor.'

The Doctor's eyes gleamed fiercely, his pain forgotten. The Master! I thought as much! Send me back! I can't very well fight him here; I'm... '

'Too vulnerable?' the voice of the Matrix suggested. That is why you must stay. The danger is within, not without, and that is where it must be faced, Doctor, and where the battle must be fought.'

The Surgeon General, a Time Lord named Shandar, had arrived and examined the Doctor and had pronounced his condition too precarious to move him to the Medicatrix. With the aid of the two guards, he and Andred were able to get the Doctor up on a table. After hearing Borusa's reasoning, Shandar concurred with the President as to the malady affecting the patient and the seriousness of the situation.

Kelke paced, trying to walk off his profound irritation. 'Perhaps the Doctor will just die and save us a lot of trouble,' he muttered and then aloud continued; 'I don't see what the problem is. If this incarnation dies, then so be it. It isn't as if it were his final incarnation.'

Shandar shook his head, sighing heavily and stroking his long grey beard as if searching for inspiration there. 'Regeneration is always a tricky phase,' he murmured, 'and a very vulnerable one. We still don't understand everything about it but we do know the mind plays a great part in it as the personality readjusts, bringing out this facet while dampening down that one. The core personality must still be whole and - with the Doctor in kyreth - that is not the case. My guess is that he has been falling into his kyreth for some time.'

Shandar played with the ends of his beard which were about at his chest. His voice, high and thin naturally, now seemed to keen as he continued his analysis, talking to himself as much as to the others. 'Death now would most certainly fracture the core personality beyond any hope of its reconstitution. His body would become a husk. Who knows what might possess and inhabit it? No, no. The Doctor must not die while in kyreth, while in contact with the A.P.C. Net. His kyreth might spread to all the other minds in the Matrix. Can you imagine - all our greatest minds, preserved in the A.P.C. Net, undergoing kyreth at the same time?' The Surgeon General shivered and the others in the room found the shiver spreading to them. 'It would be his doom, most certainly,' Shandar murmured through his beard, 'but it would probably be Gallifrey's doom as well.'

This is madness!' The Doctor protested inside his own brain. 'The Master has some sort of plot brewing which I suppose only I can thwart but no-one will tell me anything other than to 'Stay put!' This is more than madness - it's simply not cricket!'

There was no response from the Matrix but instead there was a laugh, a laugh that started slowly and then built in sound and madness as it froze the Doctor's blood, for it was the laughter of the Master.

'I was right,' the Doctor breathed, every sense alert; 'he is here!'

A noise from behind made him turn abruptly but it was not the Master he saw. It was a man and a woman, dressed in rags, their faces a grey ashen pallor, staring at him, walking slowly towards him. Dumbfounded, the Doctor demanded, 'Who are you?'

'He doesn't remember us,' the man intoned mournfully, his expression never changing.

'Why should he?' responded the woman, truly his mate, down to the intonation of her voice, the flat lifeless expression of her face. 'There are so many dead.'

The Doctor stared at them both, desperately trying to pick out their features, racing through his own memories, trying to add the colour of life to their withered cheeks, retreating before these shambling dead. 'I don't understand,' he told them.

The man spoke first. 'Just two lives, Doctor - lives in thrall to the Daleks. Remember when we were herded in front of you?'

'On the planet Skaro, birthplace to the Daleks, cursed to its very stones.'

'Our lives were burned from our bodies by the Dalek death ray.'

'All for your benefit as you stood by Davros, watching.'

Yes, something of a memory occurred to him. Davros, the mad creator of the Daleks, and the damned planet Skaro, and the Doctor - was it as the Fool or the Dandy - standing there, unable to prevent what was happening. The memory assaulted him and the Doctor shied away from it more than the approaching dead.

This time the woman spoke first. 'You are guilty of our deaths.'

'How many other lives have been snuffed out because of you?'

'Your hands are stained with innocent blood.'

'An eye for an eye, Doctor.'

'It's a simple matter of arithmetic, really.' The couple stepped aside and, from behind, he saw the monstrous squat shape of a Dalek, studded, floating on a thin cushion of air, its one telescopic eye glaring at the Doctor. In its shrill metallic monotone it began its chant: ' Seek and destroy... seek and destroy!'

The Doctor cried out, 'I never wanted anyone to die from these hideous machines!'

'But you could have stopped their creation,' said the man.

'And you didn't,' said the woman.

The Dalek continued forward, screaming, 'EXTERMINATE... EX-TER-MIN-ATE!' From its spindly arm the death ray protruded and the beam caught the Doctor full in the chest. With a cry, he slumped to the ground while, over all, there came the mocking laughter of the Master.

Outside, the chamber - as well as the city - was rocked by explosions. Shandar pulled himself to his feet and checked the scanning device - a small electrical circlet set the Doctor's fevered brow, pulsing with lights. The Surgeon General shook his head, looking very bothered.

'Another artron surge, Excellency,' he reported to Borusa.

'Would you please explain to me what is going on?' Kelke demanded of the Surgeon General; 'And in lay terms, please!'

Yes, Evidon thought, keep it simple. Perhaps then even our Chancellor will understand.

Shandar paused, partly to gather his thoughts and partly because it seemed to irritate Kelke, whom the Surgeon General was finding most annoying. Putting his hands behind his back in the best tutorial lecturing mode he could muster, Shandar said, 'According to basic theory of cybernetics, a brain is analogous to a computer because it is a complex, interdependent, cross-referencing network of information. What happens to a computer when it is programmed with a series of facts or information that it cannot process, yet is ordered to do so?'.

Kelke blinked.

'It tries to resolve the conflict,' Borusa prompted.

Kelke glared at the older man; cybernetic theory had not been his strong point back in the Academy.

Shandar nodded approvingly at the President and then continued. 'If its attempt fails, the circuitry shorts out and its memory core is damaged and that is what the kyreth is doing to the Doctor. His personality is desperately trying to integrate the emotions generated by his kyreth.' The Time Lord sighed heavily. 'If I can't check these erratic surges in his artron energy, the Doctor's brain will literally burn out.'

Deep within himself, the Doctor curled his long body into a ball and clutched at himself in pain. 'Hearts flayed by fire,' he gasped. 'My fault... millions dead...' The Doctor took deep, shuddering breaths, forcing himself to breathe in a measured count until the pain subsided. He knew the act of breathing wasn't real but a metaphor; still, it seemed to help and soon the Doctor was able to shakily get to his feet once more. The place now seemed to be a blasted heath and the wind was whipping him ferociously. 'Cold... so cold... need to find shelter!' He glanced around and, at the top of a small rise, beside a leafless barren tree, he saw a robed figure sitting cross legged on the ground, a figure that he thought he knew from a long time ago. He was... what was..? The Hermit. Yes.

Bending into the wind, the Doctor made his way to the figure. Clutching the shattered tree, the Doctor gasped to the Hermit, 'Many, many years ago I came and poured out the sorrows of my heart. I never dreamed I would taste such desolation again. Please... show me the daisiest daisy.'

In response, the winds died down and everything faded to black except for a full length oval mirror in a heavy, ebony frame that materialised in front of the Doctor. A voice commanded him to look and, with great reluctance, the Doctor lifted his bowed head and stared at the figure in the mirror.

The mirrored figure stood tall and erect, dressed identically to the Doctor down to the celery in his lapel but his face was not the same. There was a leering grin, a black goatee and moustache, dark hair slicked back and almost forming a widow's peak. There were the pointed eyebrows and the mad glint in the eyes of the Master staring out at him.

'Greetings, Doctor,' he grinned triumphantly; 'You've been looking for me, haven't you. Well, now you've found me.'

As his mocking laughter began again, the Doctor felt in the pocket of his coat and found a cricket ball. With two motions, he pulled it out and heaved it at the mocking image in the mirror with all his might, throwing himself off balance as he did so. Slowly, so slowly, the ball seemed to journey through the air until it touched the glass surface. The mirror splintered and cracked, the shards of the mirror slowly erupting outwards. The Doctor barely had time to put his hands in front of his face as the shards raced past, cutting the backs of his hands. Drops of blood sprayed here and there as the mocking laughter died out. The Doctor exhaled slowly and then, staggering, he walked over to the shattered mirror and retrieved his cricket ball. One large piece of the mirror caught his eye and he picked it up as well after returning the cricket ball to the outside pocket of his coat. In it he could still see the image of his foe, dressed in the Doctor's own clothes. The Doctor let it slip from his hand and shatter on the ground.

'My daisiest daisy,' he muttered bitterly.

The Master, now attired in his usual black brocaded tunic and trousers, stepped forward out of the darkness and gave the Doctor a hearty pat on the back. 'Well, Doctor - allies at last!' he smiled.

The Doctor could barely summon the energy to look back over his shoulder and glare at the renegade. 'I am not your ally,' was all he could mutter and then shook the Master's hand off his shoulder.

'Ah, but we're so alike, Doctor,' the other smirked, circling around in front of him. 'We are both renegade Time Lords. And thieves. And criminals.'

'That is where we differ,' the Doctor replied, willing himself to confront his greatest enemy; 'I seek to mend. You seek to destroy. I seek to help. You seek to rule. The rules I've broken have been done only in the interest of helping those who live. You use sentient lives and crush them and throw them away.'

The Master sneered in cold disdain. 'How grandly put, Doctor - considering you were the person responsible for unleashing the Daleks on the Universe! And you were the one who failed to save your little pet, your companion, the boy Adric!' The Master suddenly leapt forward and seized the Doctor's two hands, still scarred and bloodied from the cuts he had received from the shattered mirror. 'You hypocrite!' the Master blazed; 'Your hands are as stained as mine, not only with your own blood, and yet you claim to act as an intergalactic agent of altruism! The grandest delusion of all - the noble Doctor, so concerned with the welfare of others, all the time wreaking havoc across time and space!'

The Doctor reeled, gasping. Each accusation was like a physical blow, each finding its own wound, so precisely matched to his own pain!

With contempt, the Master threw down the Doctor's hands. 'You tell me whose sins have been the greatest,' he spat, 'he who attempted evil but failed or he who attempted good but instead destroyed?'

The Doctor sunk to his knees and the Master now regarded him with amusement. 'My words too harsh a reflection, Doctor?' he asked pleasantly.

The Doctor feebly lifted his head. It seemed so great a burden, as if there were chains around it and chains around his two hearts as well and they were attached to great weights. It was hard to breathe. He was, he knew, dying. Before him he saw the lowest rung of a wooden stairway, a simple slat and, attached to it, a crude wooden banister. 'So... it has come to this,' the Doctor panted. Painfully, he pulled himself to his feet and looked upwards to the scaffold and the crosstree and to where the Master waited. With a sigh, the Doctor laid one hand on the banister and wearily began the long climb up the stairs of the gallows.

The Surgeon General stood up straight from his examination of the Doctor, shaking his head slowly and murmuring, 'Respiration's almost nil; glucose level's dangerously low and the artron level horribly high. The Doctor has taxed his willpower to the point of collapse. It's a wonder he's still clinging to life.'

Borusa stood up slowly. 'Then may be one more chance. Shandar; if I entered into the Matrix with the Doctor, I may be able to help him find his way out.' The President waved off the flurry of protest on all sides. 'I am attuned to the A. P C. Net. I am the only one who has access, in my position as President. Yes, yes, I know-there is no time to attempt a formal linkage. I shall have to attempt direct telepathic contact with the Doctor. At the very least, I may be able to shield the Matrix from the Doctor's kyreth.'

'And if his kyreth should infect you?' Shandar demanded.

Borusa gave a small eloquent shrug. 'For the good of Gallifrey, I see no other choice. It may be that I can save the Doctor, but at the very least I shall hope to save the Matrix.'

Kelke surprised them all by siding with Borusa. 'The President is quite right. There should be no more said about it. Time is at premium, gentlemen.'

The chancellor smiled at the President, nodding in a deferential manner, but Borusa was not fooled. He knew that Kelke saw a political opportunity; if the President did not survive the attempt, a new President would be needed, and Kelke fancied himself for the part.

'Over my dead body,' thought Borusa and then acknowledged to himself with a slight ironic smile that was exactly how it would be.

Andred touched Borusa's shoulder and whispered a plea that he be allowed to go in the President's place but the older man refused. 'This requires a discipline far beyond your years.' Then, lowering his voice to only Andred could, hear, he added, 'Keep an eye on Kelke.'

Andred acknowledged with a short sharp nod as Borusa prepared himself to enter into a telepathic bond with the Doctor and the Matrix.

The Doctor stood with head bowed as the Master fixed a noose around his neck. The Master seemed to be feeling quite jolly and admired his own handiwork. 'I decided on this, knowing your affection for Earth and its ways. I hope you appreciate the effort. I must confess, I am a bit surprised, you're being so co-operative. It's not like you to go so meekly to the slaughter. Not that I object, mind you.'

The Doctor lifted his head and stared the Master straight in the eye with a look of profound contempt.

'You were right - I've become like you and I'll end my existence before I'm thoroughly corrupted by power.'

The Master stared back at the Doctor with unflinching venom in his eyes. 'You know this gives me free rein to pursue and achieve my destiny as ruler of the Universe.'

It was the Doctor who looked away first. 'Yes,' he whispered.

His opponent, his unyielding nemesis, strode over to the lever of the trap-door and grasped it in both hands. 'Then go down in final defeat before me, Doctor, realising you have lost everything!'

And he prepared to release the trap. Borusa established a telepathic link with the Doctor and found his psychic self in the middle of a maelstrom, winds and voices plucking at him, tearing at his mind, shrieking in his ears. He put up his hands as if to fend off the assault and heard a deep rumbling voice over-riding all the rest. 'You were a fool to come here, Borusa!' the voice grated harshly.

'During the most recent invasion of our world, the Doctor gambled his life, the entire planet of Gallifrey, and time itself to save my life from a Vardan death beam. I never thought I'd get the chance to repay the debt.'

The voice laughed harshly. 'And this is how you will repay him? You have boasted how your discipline enabled you to master your own kyreth but this is the Doctor's kyreth and you have not the experience to master it.'

Borusa put down his hands, threw up his head and defied the winds and the voice. 'Nevertheless, I will attempt it!'

The winds fell off but the voice still boomed and before him, Borusa found the shards of the mirror into which the Doctor had stared.

'Walk his path, then, if you can!' sneered the dark voice. 'Look into the glass and see more of yourself than you ever dared!'

Borusa picked up a large shard of the mirror that was at his feet and stared into it. As he watched, he saw the face within change and although the figure still wore Borusa's clothes, it was the face of the Black Guardian, a master of chaos, that stared back out at him.

'Yes, Borusa,' the Dark Guardian rumbled, for it was his voice that Borusa had heard, 'you have yet to face me within you. The Doctor has almost failed in his own confrontation - as you have failed in yours.'

With a cry, Borusa flung down the shard and then covered his face with his own hands. The next thing of which he was aware was someone shaking him and calling his name

Looking up, he saw the faces of those he had left behind in his rooms. Andred, Shandar and Evidon looking anxious and Kelke unable to mask his disappointment.

'What happened, your Excellency?' Evidon asked quietly.

Borusa could still feel the Dark Guardian within him or was it only that portion of his own soul that echoed the enemy? They must be able to see it, in his face, in his eyes. They must feel it, coiling deep in his soul, the darkness radiating out.

No. He could see from their faces they did not. They would not. He could keep it concealed from them. He could master it. The darkness would not consume him. He was still himself.

'I could not reach him,' Borusa said aloud brusquely, standing and shoving away their attempts to help. 'The attempt failed. The Doctor is on his own.'

Andred stared at the comatose body of the Doctor and couldn't even be sure the Time Lord was breathing any longer. If Borusa could not reach him and the Doctor could not help himself, who could help him now?

The Doctor's eyes were closed, waiting for the inevitable snap of the rope, when a voice called as if from a far distance, and all it said was, 'Stop.'

The Doctor's eyes popped open as the command was repeated four more times around him and the scaffold. Five figures walked towards him, five figures out of the mist of time and the Doctor's own past, approaching the Master and the man in the noose.

The first was a young woman and she looked up and said, 'Do you know me, Grandfather?'

The Scientist, his white hair reaching his high starched collar and around the noose, whispered, 'Susan!'

The second figure was a hulking young man in military dress, a beret across his head, and a patch on his shoulder that proclaimed him a member of UNIT. He looked at the figure with the noose about its neck, shook his head with a little laugh and smiled up with a broad smile. 'You sure know how to get yourself into some dandy fixes, Doc,' he said.

The Clown shook the brown mop of hair out of his eyes and stared down at the other figure. 'Sergeant Benton?' he breathed.

The third figure was another woman, somewhat older than the first. Pert and pretty, dressed in a miniskirt, hands on hips, head cocked, she regarded the man on the scaffold.

'Always getting into scrapes and always depending on us to help you get out of them,' she sighed, her voice full of fondness.

The Dandy stared at her and murmured, 'Sarah Jane!'

The fourth figure was also a woman, tall and aristocratic with long blonde hair straight down her back.

She stopped and folded her arms, cocked an eyebrow and had a slight amused smile as she shook her head. 'Really, Doctor. What are you playing at?'

And the Fool stared at her and sighed, 'Romana!'

The last approaching figure was a boy in a tunic wearing a gold star for mathematics, his hair shaggy and somewhat unkempt, and he said, 'We expect better of you, Doctor.'

And the Doctor stared and cried out, 'Adric! Forgive me!'

Adric replied very firmly, 'No, Doctor. We won't. There is no need. Forgive yourself instead.'

The scaffolding was gone, the noose was gone, and five of the Doctor's companions gathered around him. The Doctor's mind reeled; he didn't understand what they were doing there, how they could be there at all.

'We're here because you summoned us,' Susan told him. When the Doctor objected that he had not, Sarah Jane was quite insistent that he had. 'You called us up from within you.' The Doctor was utterly flummoxed.

It was for Romana to explain to him. 'You have pushed yourself to the very brink. You have almost given into despair but there is something in you that would not allow that. So you summoned us up to help you.'

The Doctor was still uncomprehending.

Sergeant Benton gave a short laugh. 'For a guy who's so smart, Doc, sometimes you're pretty thick. Don't you get it? We're all a part of you.'

Susan put it more gently. 'We're all aspects of you, Grandfather, and these are the forms you have given us. Do you know us now?'

The Scientist blinked a few times and then spoke softly as awareness lit in his eyes. 'You're my memory, aren't you? My past. The sense of family that still linger. I know you.'

With a smile, Susan kissed her Grandfather on the cheek and disappeared within him.

The Clown turned and addressed Sergeant Benton. 'And you are duty - that which drives me on.'

Smiling happily, Benton gave a snappy salute, shook the Clown by his hand, and disappeared inside him.

The Dandy turned and placed his hands on Sarah Jane's shoulders, looking her fondly in the eye.

'You're my curiosity, Sarah Jane Smith. It's what we always shared - our common link. Am I right?'

Sarah Jane rushed forward and hugged the Dandy. 'Right as rain, Doctor,' she sighed and disappeared inside him.

The Fool looked for a moment at Romana. 'We're both Time Lords, you and I,' he rumbled, 'so I suppose you could represent my ties to Gallifrey. But I prefer to think not. You rebelled and ran away from me rather than return. You know what I think? I think you are my rebel side - and my key to time.' A large smile lit up his horsy face and he held out his hand to her. Romana took it, curtsied with a wink, and disappeared inside him.

That left the thatch-haired Doctor and the young boy facing one another.

'I wanted to save you so much. I would've given my life to save you,' the Doctor told him.

'It was my life to give, Doctor,' Adric told him. 'It was my choice. I made it knowing full well what I was doing. I wish you would honour it. Do you know yet what I am?'

The Doctor thought a moment and was slow to answer. 'You are... I think you are sacrifice. My willingness to give up all to save others. And I think you are my grief for all those I could not save. Am I right?'

'Yes. Do you think you can accept me?'

'I think so.'

The two then hugged and Adric disappeared within the Doctor.

That left only one. The Doctor now turned and faced the Master. 'Explain me, Doctor,' he whispered, 'if you can.'

The Doctor was calm and confident, no longer the broken figure he had become, no longer lost in his own doubts and fears. He felt the knowledge and power and love of all those who existed within him. 'You are not the Master - nor will I let you be the master of me. You are my dark side; all of my doubts and fears manifested as the one person I fear I could become.'

The Master laughed softly and slight maniacally, his dark eyes glittering as he stared into the Doctor. 'Very good, Doctor. Do you think you can embrace me as you did those other figures. Will you open your arms and take me into your soul, knowing what I am?'

'I may not enjoy you,' the Doctor told his alter ego, 'but I will not deny you. Come take your place.'

The Master shuddered, perhaps in relief, and then his entire form turned inky black and changed shape, its legs growing longer, and it fell flat and two dimensional on the ground and attached itself at the

Doctor's heels. The Time Lord shuddered as well, as if something had pierced him, and then he looked down and saw his shadow once more mimicking his actions in a distorted but familiar fashion.

The Doctor laughed. 'I hadn't realised you'd gone missing, old fellow. Peter Pan was right. One should never be separated from his own shadow.'

'So, Doctor - you are yourself once more.' The voice of the Matrix sounded all around him.

The Doctor looked up. 'Yes, rather - although you might have told me I was going through kyreth. I could've sorted this out much sooner.'

'The whole point was that you had to go through kyreth. I did tell you the danger was within and not without.'

The Doctor grimaced. He was not altogether convinced but he wasn't about to argue the point. He had just figured something out. 'That is why you wanted me back on Gallifrey, wasn't it? Because of our link. My kyreth was causing your malfunctions.'

'Just so. Had you not survived, my core would also have been shattered.'

'And we wouldn't want that,' the Doctor murmured. More aloud, he added, 'Assuming our work is done here, how does one get out?'

'Simplicity itself, Doctor. You have only to wake up.'

The Doctor's eyes popped open, he sat up, spun around so his long legs were off the table and said a cheery, 'Hello!' to the sea of faces surrounding him.

Andred could scarcely believe his eyes. 'Doctor! Are... are you alright?!'

'Never better,' the Doctor replied, jumping to his feet and then doing a couple of deep knee bends to demonstrate. 'Fit as a fiddle.' He took a deep breath, scanned the gaping faces, and told them, 'Well, it's been a most fascinating visit but I really ought to be going. Good bye.'

'I think not!' roared Kelke, shaking off his initial surprise. 'There are several charges outstanding against you and you will answer for them!'

Evidon turned and coldly addressed the Chancellor with the contempt he could no longer keep entirely suppressed.

'No charges have yet been filed, Chancellor, and I doubt very much that they will be. The Doctor was the victim here and he acquitted himself honourably. I am cancelling the Amber Alert. The Doctor is free to go.'

Kelke was outraged at this and departed in a huff, threatening to go directly to the Supreme Council and cite the Castellan for dereliction of duty.

Evidon was thoroughly unperturbed by this but told the Doctor he should make haste and depart while he could.

'Every time I come home there seems to be a trial of some sort. Almost makes a fellow feel he isn't wanted.' The Doctor sighed but then enthusiastically shook Evidon's hand, thanked him and then turned to Borusa. 'I'm very grateful for your help, your Excellency. I sensed you trying to help me while I was in the Matrix and I know you've risked a great deal for me. I shall not forget it.'

Borusa thought, he knows. He senses the darkness within me. He is aware of it. No. He doesn't know. No one does. Perhaps he suspects. I should stop him now, destroy him before he destroys me. No, that's nonsense. The Doctor is no danger to me. He might become a danger to me. He isn't yet.

Deal with him when he has become a danger. Lay your plans. Later. Later.

Outwardly, Borusa only smiled and shook the Doctor's hand.

Andred walked the Doctor out to the hall. 'Better not to linger,' he told his friend; 'The Castellan is right. Kelke will do you harm if he can.'

'Only if he catches me,' the Doctor smiled merrily at Andred. With that, he turned and raced up the corridor towards his TARDIS, his shadow nipping at his heels.

The Effect Of Dimensional Transcendence On Mozzarella Cheese

By

Diane Duane

It was fifteen years back, and the new apartment was coming along very nicely, thank you. Dun na-mDoirse ar Oscailt, (pronounce it DorsaSkelty: that's close enough), the House of the Open Doors, that place quickly became for the couple of years I spent there before life changed all out of recognition. (Husbands will do that to you: and worse yet if you're both writers - the dreams get tangled.)

It was a good little apartment in the bottom back of a Philly brownstone, a newly restored historic building; it had a fireplace and big Georgian windows and lots of what the apartment ads call 'amenities.' The second favourite of these was the Jacuzzi in the bathtub. The favourite was the back terrace and garden, which quickly came to feature a set of pentatonic chimes, a birdfeeder over-patronised by purple finches, and (in the ground) two bemused rosebushes, several pots of primroses, a pride of dozing tiger lilies, and a scarlet crowd of nasturtiums which were plotting to overrun the universe.

Lunchtime one Thursday, the terrace also had a TARDIS, but when you name a house 'the OpenDoored', you had better get used to such things.

The back door was the one that stayed open. The front door opened onto one of the neighbourhood's livelier areas, and I would have hated one of the passers-by, in a weak moment, to take a fancy to my electronics and run afoul of the Dragon. The back door gave onto nothing but the bricks of the terrace, the spaghetti of the downhanging phone lines for half the neighbourhood, and the backs of my neighbours' buildings, most of which turned a blind eye to mine. This suited me, as I would otherwise have had difficulty explaining the spacecraft, alien beings and publishers passing through. Especially the publishers.

The TARDIS is another problem, of course, especially when you wham your whole right side into it because you're going sideways down the stairs with your arms full of a twenty-pound bag of potting soil (the soil here is clayey and needs lightening, not to mention fertiliser). I think I must have said a bad word, because several pigeons fell off the phone wires without my having thrown anything at them. Bad words don't scare a TARDIS, though: especially not this one, and there it stood, its silly door ajar and a very astonishing aroma coming from inside. I dropped the potting soil. It was, after all, lunchtime. Well, nearly.

I put my head in and looked around. There was no one in the console room. 'You are sitting on my new doormat!' I said, rather loudly.

The console muttered. This is a sound that friends of the Doctor have heard sometimes, in the middle of the night, and told him about in the morning... and he always denies that any such thing is possible. But we his friends have our doubts. Isomorphic circuitry works both ways; it's impossible for such a machine... if machine is the right word... not to become sentient with prolonged exposure to a specific personality. Besides, the White Guardian has had dealings with this craft, and nothing is ever quite the same after *that* one touches it. '

Sorry, dear,' I said. 'Not your fault. Permission to come aboard?'

It was closer to a sigh this time: nothing more overt. I scooted on past. Doors lay open in front of me, as usual, leading inward, and sometimes downward or upward. Some of the ones I passed were open a crack, implying that one might peek into them (though no more). I got to see several I had never thought existed, and some I knew had to, but was surprised by, nonetheless. The Orrery Room, for example, does not have just a model universe in it. Also, one of the 'boot-cupboards' has a ceiling that appears to be Michelangelo's warm-up for the Sistine Chapel... and the Pope would have been shocked, as the overarching fresco recounts the battle of Rassilon with the Vampires. Very experimental. And then there was the Master Bedroom. *Goodness....*

Crashing and bashing noises became apparent. I headed for them.

The Doctor's kitchen was larger than mine. Well, I might have expected it. He's covertly a complete addict to creature comforts (goodness, that private lounge!!)... And the kitchen caters to his traditionalist tendencies wonderfully. It's a big, bright, pleasant room all done in brick and quarry tile; sunlit (impossible) through big French windows (equally impossible) with a small, formal herb garden visible through them, and sweet spring air coming in and moving the curtains (from which Spring, where and when?).... One window has a hundred-year-old rosemary bush (almost a tree) half coming in through it. There's an open hearth at one side, with chairs and a fat sofa drawn up to it, and that day there were several books laid open face down on the cushions (Genet's *Life of a Thief,* and Ludwig Bemelmans' *La Bonne Table,* and T.H. White's

England Have My Bones. As I said... an incurable traditionalist.) In the middle is a big freestanding 'island' with a cutting-board top of blond wood, and all around the walls, tall handsome-looking cabinets and appliances. Hanging from the ceiling is one of those wrought-iron chef's racks festooned with pots, utensils, hanging plants, and several blasters, all very dusty. I think he uses them to open cans.

And there off to one side was the source of the noise: a welter of pans, bowls, and other junk that one of the cupboards had dumped when opened - and standing in the middle of them, that slender fair-haired shape in the usual striped pants and white shirt and suspenders, but without the fawn-coloured frock coat. It had been replaced by a long white linen barman's apron with a question mark tastefully embroidered on one deep pocket. The Doctor's sleeves were rolled up, and he was holding a large disc of metal in his hands, and examining it, first one side, then the other.

It looked like the inner back plate from one of the TARDIS's roundels.

'Problem?' I said.

He didn't look up. 'Good morning,' he said. 'No.'

'Afternoon,' I said. 'Just. What are you cooking?' The smell was Italian, and it was driving me wild.

'Nothing yet,' he said, sounding mildly annoyed.

'Look at this; it's been scratched. I expect Tegan's been using it as a tea tray again. I keep telling her, the non-stick coating -'

'You are too cooking, I can smell it.'

'That's just the sauce.' He scrubbed at the object. It was one of those new jet-black pizza pans.

'Well then, you *are* cooking.'

'Are you here to argue,' he said, 'or to have lunch?'

'Lunch, definitely lunch.' I sat down. 'What are we having?'

'Madam, are you blind? Pizza,' the Doctor said, with an air of intense satisfaction. He stepped out of the fallen pots and pans and headed for the chopping block. 'An ancient Gallifreyan dish, invented by Rassilon himself. Making pizza is a source of uplift to the soul and a subject of deep metaphysical significance.'

'And your soul needs uplifting?'

'No,' the Doctor said, 'But it's early for tea, and I'm hungry. You leave souls out of this for the moment, my girl.' He put the pizza pan down on the chopping block and went to a cupboard, from which he took down a canister of flour.

'Let me get this straight. Rassilon invented pizza? Aren't the Italians going to have something to say about this?'

'Not if some people don't tattle,' said the Doctor, looking at me most accusingly. 'Besides -' and here he opened the refrigerator and scouted about inside, looking a bit less combative and more bemused, 'they *would* say they invented it, wouldn't they? Surely it looked that way to them. Poor things that they are, seeing time as a linear function instead of in eight dimensions. How would they know if, before he laid down the Laws of Time, old Rassilon popped ahead a few tens of thousands of years and had a look at the recipe, and then nipped back home to Gallifrey and invented it first? Prior claim is everything.' He shut the refrigerator, grabbed a small bowl from the dish- drainer by the sink, filled it about half full, and put it down on the chopping board along with a small foil-wrapped cube. 'But even if they *did* invent it,' said the Doctor, looking smug, 'Gallifreyan pizza has something that no Earth pizza ever will.'

'And that is -?'

The Doctor unwrapped the foil cube and crumbled its contents into the warm water. 'Sentient yeast,' he said. He peered down into the bowl. 'Wake up, lads! Work time! And no anchovies,' he added. 'Rassilon hated anchovies. And capers too. All those fiddly bits, sausage and prosciutto, ridiculous.'

Now something peculiar began. Sometimes when you have a cold you get a subdued muttering and buzzing in your head, as if you have company. This was like that, but more assertive and less like a cold-germ convention. 'What in the world -'

'Just the yeast, they're on a pretty low wavelength,' said the Doctor, opening the flour canister. 'Just above celery. No fiddly bits in *this* pizza! Just a good crisp crust, and tomato sauce, and plenty of cheese. The elemental building blocks of life.' He paused and looked around a touch guiltily, as if Rassilon might overhear him, then added, 'Maybe some garlic. He was a good chap, but he liked it so bland!'

The buzzing inside my head was getting more intricate: it began to sound like a chorus. 'For pity's sake, they're *singing...!* What about?'

The Doctor cocked his head up for a second, listening, as he measured out flour into another bowl. 'Oh, the usual. How nice it is to turn sugar and flour protein into carbon dioxide and alcohol, and fulfil their purpose in life, all that sort of thing.' He looked back down at his work, smiling. 'Nice to listen to, isn't it? I told you it was uplifting to the soul.'

'Yes, but - Doctor, when you bake the crust, they'll *die!'*

'Of course they will.' He reached over to one side for a long-necked oilcan and splashed a little olive oil into the flour. 'And a lot more mercifully than they would if you just let them drown in their own alcohol.

Hand me the saltcellar, will you please? Thank you. Death by fire,' he said, salting the flour. 'They find it - well, you'll hear how they find it, I suspect. Are they bubbling yet?' He peered into the yeast bowl. 'So they are. Here you go, gentlemen.' He poured the yeast and water into the flour bowl, and began to knead.

I listened to the yeast singing partitas that would have left Bach with his mouth open, and watched the Doctor knead. He did it well. Some people are afraid of pizza dough, which needs to be gooey in its early stages to develop the gluten properly. The Doctor was right in there, sticking and being stuck to, flinging the stuff about in great good cheer.

'You like that,' I said.

'Too right,' the Doctor said cheerfully. 'Too many Time Lords are afraid to get their hands full of dough... that's probably why they only make pizza on state holidays. As a memorial to Rassilon, you understand.' He snorted softly. 'So busy looking to see who's dropping sauce on themselves at the state dinner that they don't even notice what they're eating. Shameful. Here, while you're not doing anything, there's some garlic already peeled in the 'fridge. Would you get it out? Thanks. The garlic press is in that crock. Just do me three or four cloves, if you'd be so kind.

'- And anyway, is it so awful,' he added, more reflectively, 'to die when you've got the job done that you came here for? Whatever it is.'

I pressed a clove of garlic. 'Not if you know what you're here for.'

'Ah, yes,' the Doctor said, and smiled to himself. 'I suppose it's wise to find out, then. Here we go.' He turned out the dough on the floured board and kneaded it a few minutes more.

'It'll be a while rising,' I said.

'Well, yes and no,' said the Doctor, reaching for another bowl, one lightly greased with olive oil. He turned the ball of dough into it and covered it with a teacloth. 'I'm hungry *now...* and I daresay you are too, to judge by that appalling noise your insides are making... so I shall cheat a bit.'

He picked up the bowl and carried it over to a small appliance that I thought at first was a microwave oven.

'Surely you're not going to But he put the bowl in and turned the appliance on. The buzzing in my head abruptly scaled upward in pitch. 'Doctor, what *is* that?'

'A rising box,' he said, going to wash his hands. 'Actually a selective tachyon-packet field accelerator. It speeds up time on a local scale.' The Doctor shook his hands off, dried them on another teatowel, and went back to the appliance. 'It's been about two hours in there for them.'

Ping! said the accelerator, and the Doctor opened its door and took out the bowl. The dough had more than doubled in size.

'Here we go, then,' said the Doctor, and turned the dough out on the board, where he began to stretch it out flat.

'Wouldn't a rolling pin be faster?' I said.

'Never roll,' the Doctor said. 'Ruins the texture. Now then.' He lifted it into the pan, rolling the far edge of the dough slightly around the pan's edge to hold it in place. 'Olive oil, please, and a brush.' I handed him the equipment; he brushed the dough lightly with the oil. 'In the 'fridge there's about a pound of sliced mozzarella; would you get it for me, please?'

I fetched it. The Doctor took out about ten thin slices and began to lay them over the crust.

'You don't do the sauce first?' I said.

'Barbaric,' the Doctor said, looking sharply at me. The reason your civilisation fell. Will fall. Well, a contributing cause, anyway. And the reason why almost every pizza crust you ever taste is soggy. Cheese first, always.... It seals it. Then sauce. Then more cheese on top.' He finished the first layer.

'Garlic, please. Just scatter it around. Thank you.'

He reached over to the stove, where a large pot sat simmering quietly. When he took the top off, the full chorus of which that Italian aroma had been only the melody line abruptly filled the kitchen. 'Heavens!!' I said. 'Just let me stand on my head in there for a few minutes.'

The Doctor flashed a delighted grin. 'Back, back!' He stirred the pot. 'The tomatoes in the greenhouse have been quite good lately,' he said. 'It's giving them the kitchen scraps that does it, I suspect.' He poured sauce over the cheese-covered crust, then began the second layer of cheese until the whole pound of mozzarella was used up. 'Hand me that oregano, will you? Our own,' he said, looking affectionately at the spice jar. 'K9 used to sit in the garden and talk to it all the time. He did that with the basil, too... improved it tremendously. Remind me to stop by the next time I make pesto. Is the oven ready?'

'Its little light went off.'

'Good. In we go, then. I shouldn't mind,' he said, 'just the slightest nip before it's ready.'

The Doctor went over to another cabinet, opened it, and stared in thoughtfully. 'There's hardly a thing in here worth drinking,' he muttered. 'I really must run down to the wine cellar. Always assuming we still have one after that last reconfiguration. Oh well.' He came out with a bottle. 'California,' he said, holding out the bottle for me to read the label. It was a Lost Hills Cabernet sauvignon.

'Looks nice. Where's the winery?'

'How should I know? It's *lost,* isn't it?!'

He reached down wineglasses from the rack, decorked the bottle with the sonic screwdriver, and poured for both of us. The wine was that perfect liquid garnet shade, but as I sat down on the couch by the brick hearth, I started feeling a little odd, too odd to appreciate mere colour.

The Doctor sat down across from me, the look in his eyes thoughtful, though not remote. 'Wait for it,' he said, cupping his wineglass in his hands. 'Don't be afraid....'

That was when the singing began in good earnest. I was very glad to have put my own glass down, because had I been holding it I would have dropped it, and it was Orrefors. My head began slowly to fill with crashing choruses, gaining moment by moment in intensity and number: multitudinous song, delighted at doing, at being, at having been: piercing joy, growing by the second, as passage from here-and-now to otherness came closer and closer: acceptance of having been: acceptance of some indescribable about-to-be-ing: and then, *then,* the passage, the shift, out of life, out of time, into something else, something ineluctably *more* -

- and then gone, all gone: silence -

I looked up at the Doctor. My eyes were blurred with the yeast's unbearable joy.

He looked back, quite gentle-eyed. 'For what we are about to receive,' he said, soberly, but with a smile, 'may we be truly thankful.' And he drained his wineglass, and smashed it in the fireplace, and got up to take the pizza out of the oven.

What the hey?... it was his crystal. I followed suit.

What we ate was better than the best pizza I had ever had, in Brighton. Between us we ate it all, and tough luck to any companions who may have been on board; anyway, there was more sauce if they wanted to repeat the performance later. Then we did the washing-up. The Doctor does not believe in using the dishwasher when other people are around to help. It was just as well; that yeast has after-effects. Somewhere between the plates and the wineglasses he got a smiling, musing look - one I suspect his companions are often too preoccupied with their own concerns to see - and I clearly heard him wondering to whom *his* lives might be meat and drink. Later, wrist- deep in the potting soil, I started wondering too... and am doing so yet.

I make pizza nearly every Sunday now. He was right about the metaphysics....

GALLIFREYAN PIZZA

(aka Pizza alla Dottore)

Crust:

4 cups sifted flour

1 cake Fleischmann's yeast (unless you can get the Gallifreyan sort: good luck...): or one package of the 'slow-rise' type

1&1/3 C water at about 85 degrees (for the yeast)

2 tbs. salad orolive oil 1 tsp. salt

If using fresh yeast, crumble it into the water; if using dry, add some of the water to it to make a paste, then add the rest. Let the results be for about ten minutes, or until it starts to bubble a bit. (To hurry it, or just in a good-natured attempt to help it along, you may add about half a teaspoon of sugar. This is also wise if the yeast is old.) Add the yeast/water mixture to the flour, salt and oil, and knead. Put in a greased bowl, covered with a towel, and let rise in a warm place for two hours.

Have ready two 12-inch or one large pizza pan (oiled, if they are not already nonstick). Flatten and stretch the dough to fit. Brush with olive oil.

CHEESE:

For maximum effect, no pizza should ever contain less than half a pound of a good skim- or part-skim mozzarella. (Fontina is also good for a change.) The

Doctor, having growing companions to feed, uses rather more. Remember to lay down a layer first to seal the crust. The crumbly kind is all right, but mozzarella (because of its long-chain molecules) works best sliced.

SAUCE:

Everyone has their favourite (the Doctor's recipe is memorable... if I can find it, it'll follow at a later date). Pour on enough to suit your taste. Add garlic, and more cheese on top.

Bake the whole thing in a preheated 400-degree oven for about 25 minutes, or until the crust is light brown.

Only a Cyberman or other lowlife would do this in the microwave.

And whether it sings or not, appreciate the yeast. It gave you the best hours of its life.

Nameless

By

David Bickley

5 April, 1973

He was bom in the late afternoon. He had nine thousand, four hundred and eighty-two days of his life left to live.

It had been a difficult pregnancy, his mother later told him: he had been a breech baby, his feet and not his head insisting on coming out first, and hence he had been very difficult to deliver. Few doctors were skilled enough to deliver a child in these circumstances without employing Caesarean section and that his mother had refused utterly: she had very specialised religious views.

The lengthy and insoluble arguments which had erupted between his mother and the doctors were all cut short when his mother had suddenly started suffering convulsions. All the doctors in the hospital had been nervous of delivering the child: if they tried by the normal method they were sure that that the baby, and probably the mother as well, would die. If they did use Caesarean section, however, they knew that there would be all hell to pay legally - it would probably mean the end of their careers.

Just as one doctor had reluctantly volunteered to try to deliver the child without using Caesarean section, a young man with fair hair and a bright open smile had walked into the operating theatre. He was a temporary member of staff, apparently, one with excellent references, credentials and experience, for all his youth. He announced with calm determination that he would be the one to deliver the baby, much to the relief of all the other doctors, especially the one who had volunteered a moment or so before.

The delivery was astonishing: the young man worked carefully and professionally, somehow convincing his mother to take anaesthetics after all (another thing she had objected to) and within two hours the baby was born. He was healthy, a little smaller than was the norm, and very obligingly he had burst into tears as soon as he entered this world.

'He's beautiful,' his mother had cooed, once the child was placed in her arms. 'I shouldn't have risked it... he's so beautiful.'

It was almost a miracle, but perhaps that wasn't the oddest part: before dashing off once again, departing as abruptly as he had arrived, the young doctor had asked his mother a simple question - What was the baby going to be called?

His mother had been too exhausted to answer but a nurse had chipped in and told the young man the name which his mother had decided on. On hearing it the young man had clasped the nurse's hands in almost feverish excitement and announced to all and sundry that a great weight had been taken off his mind. Then, releasing the bemused nurse, he had crossed over to his mother's side and extended a finger to the tiny bawling bundle that lay in her arms.

'I'm so very sorry,' the young man had said, and then he left.

His mother never learned the identity of the stranger who had saved her child's life - he had apparently left his job at the hospital the very next day. And all he had wanted to know was the baby's name...

11 June, 1979

He was six years old. He had seven thousand, two hundred and twenty-six days of his life left to live.

The bloke on the other side of the table was a nutter - that was plain enough. He had ridiculous bulging eyes, ludicrously curly brown hair and a toothy grin that was frankly disturbing. Still at least he looked the part - he was supposed to be the best fortuneteller his mother had ever heard of. In the few days since he had arrived with the rest of the circus all his mum's cronies had had their fortunes read and everything had happened as he had predicted.

His mum had forced him to go along with her to see this marvellous fortune-teller. She loved this sort of thing: it appealed to what she called her 'spiritual side.' And so now he and his mother were sitting opposite this man in his rather gaudy circus tent, the exotic nature of which was rather spoiled by the presence of a blue police box lurking in the corner. It seemed oddly out of place.

'I am *Il Dottore Misterioso*,' he boomed, rather impressively. 'I know how the stars move. I know all the paths of destiny and I see the future of all who come to my booth.

I have studied among the Ancients and I use the charts and readings of the greatest seers among the Greeks.'

For a deeply credulous woman, his mother was never very keen on sales pitch. 'What system do you use then?' she asked sharply.

The fortune-teller flashed her the desperate grin used by charlatans the world over when encountering an expert in their pretended field.

'I need the date of birth of the individual in question and the precise time when he or she was born,' he announced. 'I need also the precise location of their birth and, above all, I require the name he or she was given first in this world - it is that first naming which carries the most power.' As he spoke his voice regained its former confidence and by the end of his little speech it resounded around the tent even more strikingly than before.

His mother nodded slowly. 'I know that system,' she said vaguely, 'but you don't need to know the person's name. That's rubbish.'

'I assure you, it is hugely important...'

'No, it isn't,' his mother insisted, 'and if you carry on like that we'll take our custom elsewhere.'

The fortune-teller wisely refrained from pointing out that he was in fact the only fortune-teller at the circus. 'So be it!' he boomed. 'Tell me all the other details and we can begin '

After his mother grudgingly told the man her date and place of birth, the fortuneteller rummaged for a couple of minutes among the papers and charts that lay strewn on the table, peering at them and ostentatiously making mental calculations. It was a good performance and his mother was, against her will, a little mollified.

'I can see into the future only one week,' said *Il Dottore Misterioso* eventually. 'And I see your future all too plainly.'

'What will happen?'

The fortune-teller looked a little embarrassed.

'Nothing very interesting.[1]

'Oh come on!'

Il Dottore shrugged. 'The stars foretell that you will go shopping on Tuesday and Friday and that on the Friday shop you'll forget to buy some biscuits. I told you it wouldn't be very interesting.'

His mother was fuming. 'You can do better than that! Will I meet a tall handsome stranger at least?'

'No.'

'Oh. Well then, will Anne and me win the bingo on Thursday?'

'No'

'Honestly!' said his mother. 'You're useless.'

'And now,' the fortune teller said hastily, before she could walk out in disgust, 'I will tell the future of your son.'

'Well it had better be more interesting than mine.' She tugged at the boy's sleeve. 'Come on, tell him what he wants to know.'

The boy stood there, staring at the strange man with the bulging eyes, and said nothing.

'Oh honestly!' his mother said in exasperation. 'He was born on Fifth of April 1973 at half past four in the afternoon and a right bugger he was to deliver. Nearly killed me, he did. And I had him over at St.

Thomas's.'

'The hospital on the other side of the town?' the fortune-teller queried.

'Yes, yes,' said his mother irritably. 'Now if you could get on with it?'

The man paused before diving into his charts again. 'I really do need to know his name,' he pleaded.

'Oh no you don't,' his mother said flatly.

The fortune-teller shrugged and once again went through a flurry of checking and rechecking charts, although with a good deal less enthusiasm this time. After only a minute he came to a stop and looked at the boy straight in the eye.

'He will probably win a Maths prize at school on Wednesday,' he finally declared.

The boy's mother perked up a little at this. 'That's wonderful,' she said, hugging her son to her.

He scowled and tried to pull away.

'Then again, he might not,' the fortune-teller added under his breath. 'But wait!' he cried, to recapture his client's attention. 'There's more! With this child I can see even further into the future -'

'You see - you didn't need his name at all.'

'- if he stays away from computers he will lead a long and happy life. This I predict.'

'If he stays away from what?' repeated the boy's mother incredulously. 'Honestly, I've met some crooks in my time but you're the worst of all. I've a mind to take my money back!'

She stood up abruptly and marched out of the tent, dragging her son behind her and not giving the fortune-teller enough time to remind her that she hadn't actually got round to giving him any money in the first place...

The boy remembered the fortune-teller's advice about computers. He ignored it, though: after all, the man had been as mad as a brush. Apparently he had gone missing from the circus the very next day.

18 February, 1997

He was twenty-three years old. He had seven hundred and sixty four days of his life left to live.

He pushed away the computer keyboard in despair and held his head in his hands. His plans were in ruins... Everything he had fought for and struggled for so long was lost to him... It was the thirty-seventh time he had lost at *Quake* that day.

'Sorry, old chap,' came the cheery and deeply annoying voice of his opponent from the other side of another computer linked up to his. 'But you left yourself very open there.'

'Yes, yes, I know,' he snapped. 'Look, can we call a halt for today?'

'Naturally, naturally - let's have a go at *Worms* instead. We'll see if your luck changes with that.'

'No,' he said hurriedly. 'I don't want to play any more computer games today.'

His opponent emerged from behind the computer on which he had been playing. On first impressions he had seemed quite old - his hair was almost pure white - but he displayed a continual vigour and energy that belied his years. After all, how many men older than forty took quite such an active interest in computers, and games in particular?

'A sad thing for the owner and manager of an internet café to say,' his opponent murmured.

'You're just too good for me.'

The other man rubbed his chin thoughtfully - it was a curious mannerism of his. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I just love gadgets and I've spent far too long recently in a place where there wasn't anything like this.' He swept his arm around in a broad gesture that encompassed the whole of the office and the computers within it, as well as the café beyond.

'You're more than making up for it now. Coffee?'

'Oh yes, thank you.'

While he was making the coffee, he kept a careful eye on his erstwhile opponent. He had been a regular customer at *Café Oudeis* for about a month or so now. Indeed he had been so regular, and so generous in the amount of time he had spent at the establishment, that he had become a friend of the manager and had been invited on a few occasions into his office to play computer games against the manager himself. He was good company, despite his annoying tendency to win at practically everything even when all the odds were stacked against him. *Especially* when all the odds were against him in fact.

Nevertheless the white-haired man made him uneasy. He got the impression that he was watching him, keeping an eye on everything he did. He even suspected that he was asking questions about him among the other customers at the café.

He wouldn't have liked that sort of behaviour at the best of times: he was a very private person. Now, however, things were more sensitive than usual: he had, the other day, received an offer of a job from a rather secretive organisation that desperately wanted his services and which was prepared to pay him handsomely for them. It was also an organisation suspected of adopting a somewhat nonchalant attitude towards certain aspects of the law but such was its power that no one had ever been eager to challenge it. Despite this, however, he was mightily tempted to take up the job offer - the café had been losing money lately and, if he was honest, the thought of being involved in an organisation that had real power appealed to him rather more than he liked...

'Actually,' the white-haired man commented airily, 'I'm rather glad we've stopped for the time being. I wanted to ask you a few questions about yourself.'

Ah! Perhaps he was investigating him after all? 'Really?' he commented blandly, while lowering his hand casually onto an alarm button set into one of the desks. The café was located in a rough area and the police had insisted that all businesses be wired up to the station in case officers needed to be sent out to deal with an emergency. He now regretted having set the device only so that the police would be alerted without the café's own alarms going off - it would have been nice to have scared this man off.

'Oh yes,' the white-haired man said. 'I heard you were thinking of changing jobs soon and I wanted to have a chat with you before you left.'

Right, that was it! He stabbed the button to send a silent warning to the police. That would get rid of this interfering busybody - if someone had in fact employed him to investigate his affairs then he could have fun sorting it out at the police station. He glanced at the clock on the office wall. The police would take about fifteen minutes to get here. All he had to do was keep this man entertained for that length of time and then the police would get him and he'd be out of his hair.

'What do you want to know?' he said, trying to keep his voice calm.

'Oh anything,' the other man said cheerfully. 'Anything at all.'

And so, half-babbling, he set about narrating the twisted sequence of events and miseries that had brought him to where he was now - sole ownership of a none too flourishing internet café. He talked about his father, who had died before he had born... he talked about his mother whom he had hated and who had been obsessed with bizarre religions and beliefs, dragging him to see every fortune teller in town... he talked about the grotty industrial town where he had grown up... he talked about his second girlfriend, the one he had really loved and who had dumped him for no reason in favour of his best friend... he talked about the unhappy year he had spent at university studying computer science before being kicked out for failing his exams... he talked about the large sum of money which his mother had unexpectedly left him in her will and which had served as the capital on which he had set up his business... he talked about anything that came into his mind and astonished himself with his own honesty. And all the time the white-haired man just sat there and listened with rapt attention.

'And now I've got a job offer from these people,' he said proudly, waving the letter the organisation had sent to him and keeping an ear open for the sound of approaching sirens.

The white-haired man took the letter from him and winced when he saw the name of the company. 'I wish you wouldn't get involved with them,' he said unhappily. 'They're not a very nice crowd.'

'Well that's none of your business,' he snapped. There! In the distance he had heard a siren! The police were here.

The white-haired man stared at him intently for a moment and then shrugged. 'I suppose not,' he said. 'One more thing - what's your real name? I know it's not Mr Oudeis as you say on your flyers: that just means 'Mr no one' in Ancient Greek.'

'I keep my name to myself,' he answered steadily. 'I've never liked it very much.'

'Come on man! Don't be awkward. We're friends, aren't we?'

'No, I don't think we are.' The sirens had become much louder and he was sure he could hear the sound of cars drawing up outside. 'I've called the police,' he said triumphantly. 'I don't like people snooping around my business.'

The white-haired man scowled and briefly glanced in the direction where the sirens were blaring from. At that he saw his chance and leapt at him, determined to capture him before the police burst in.

The white-haired man must have seen him out of the corner of his eye. Shouting *'Hai!'* and lashing out a hand, he somehow smashed the other man to the floor. His victim lay there, gaping, unable to move. He was sure the white-haired man hadn't even touched him.

'Venusian karate, old man,' his attacker said apologetically. 'You'll recover in about five minutes but you won't be able to say anything until then. I'm sorry about that, but you really aren't making things easy for me.'

Then, without looking back, he opened up the office window that looked out onto a back alley and disappeared through it with astonishing agility. The police never caught him.

Naturally he ignored the white-haired man's advice. He sent a letter to the organisation accepting their offer the very next day. He was on his way to better things.

22 March, 1999

He was twenty-five years old. He had two days of his life left to live.

He was almost shivering with excitement. The plan was about to begin! His Boss had promised him that by the end of the week not just Great Britain but the world would be at their feet, so long as his mysterious allies were as impressive as they had been rumoured to be. And he would be one of the men who received the greatest rewards, the Boss had said: after all, without his contacts over the internet they would never have been able to acquire the hardware necessary to keep the authorities in the dark for so long. Yes, he mused, life was finally going his way.

A disturbance in the corridor outside shook him from his self-satisfied daydream. Two of the Boss's paid thugs burst into his office, half-dragging, half-carrying a strange little man between them. They came to a halt in front of his desk.

'This guy's been asking questions about you,' said one of the thugs. 'We thought you might be interested.' The other thug, a young man whose face wasn't immediately familiar, nodded but said nothing.

'What kind of questions?'

The thug screwed up his face as he tried to remember. 'About before you joined the organisation. Your old internet café thing, old passwords and code names - that sort of thing.'

'All perfectly innocent questions,' said the little man, with a faint hint of smugness. He was an odd looking character this, with his bizarre, scruffy, baggy clothes and his untidy hair which frankly suited the Sixties far better than it did the late Nineties.

'I'm sorry if I arrived at a bad time,' he continued glumly, wringing his hands. 'My transport's a little unreliable. I meant to appear at a more appropriate moment but once I was here, in the neighbourhood you might say, I thought I should come and have a look. I'm nothing to worry about, I assure you. Besides, if I were a spy, would I really come dressed like this?'

This was a good point. Unfortunately the little man then went on to spoil his argument by adding airily. 'And I can assure you I know nothing about your Project at all.' His eyes widened and he did an almost comical double-take. 'Oh my word! I shouldn't have said that, should I?'

The man behind the desk leaned forwards. 'What do you know about the Project?' he snapped.

The little man looked exasperated. 'Nothing! I told you!' he said, a little petulantly. 'Now, as I'm here, if I could ask you a few questions...?'

The man behind the desk pressed a button on his intercom. 'Boss,' he said, speaking into a microphone. 'I'm sending someone up to see you - an intruder. He knows rather more about the plan than he ought to.'

It was at that point that the second thug, the one he didn't recognise, suddenly released the little man and, almost in the same motion, knocked the first thug unconscious. 'Come on, Doctor,' he said in a thick Scottish accent. 'We've got to go!'

The little man was looking rather sadly at the crumpled body of the thug. 'Now was that really necessary, Jamie?' he asked.

The Scot gestured towards the man behind the desk. 'Yon Sassenach's raised the alarm. It's not safe any more.'

'I suppose,' the little man said ruefully. He turned to the man behind the desk, who was sitting there, his mouth wide open, speechlessly watching this little scene unfold. 'I don't suppose you could tell me your name could you? Your real name?'

'What?'

From outside the office a klaxon began to sound and in the distance came the unmistakable sound of running feet.

'Come on, Doctor!' hissed the Scot, pulling at the little man's jacket.

The little man lingered a little longer. 'You still have the chance to leave this organisation, you know,' he said, continuing to talk to the man behind the desk and ignoring his companion's entreaties. 'You could have an entirely different future.'

And with that he and his Scottish friend ran pell-mell out of the office and into the maze of corridors that lay beyond. Astonishingly they both managed to escape, despite the best efforts of the Boss and his men.

The little man's advice was ignored, of course. Leave the Boss and his friends with the main event coming so soon? He'd have to be insane. Besides which, once the event was over, the Boss would be sure to track him down for his cowardice.

Best to stay with the Boss. He'd have power beyond dreaming before the week was out - a chance to get his own back on the world and everyone who'd ever hurt him. Best to stay.

24 March, 1999

He was dead.

The Boss and the others had escaped of course. So too had the 'aliens' who had come to support the Boss's plans. He had never known if they had really been from another world. Not that it mattered now. He'd been left behind by the others and had been trapped in the Boss' base when the building had collapsed. He never stood a chance.

A white-haired old man stumbled through the debris, coughing vigorously and holding a handkerchief to his mouth to shield him from the dust. He stopped in horror when he saw the corpse and called to the soldiers who had followed him in.

'Over here! One of them didn't get out, it seems.' The old man knelt down and felt the neck of the body for a pulse in vain. 'Nothing to be done for the poor devil.'

One of the soldiers - the sergeant in fact - joined the old man beside the corpse and made a hasty search of the pockets. He found only a couple of biros, a few receipts and a sweet-wrapper. 'Nothing to identify him. Typical,' the sergeant commented brusquely. He stood up and signalled to his men. 'Right lads! Take this one away!'

The soldiers nodded grimly and carried the corpse away.

The sergeant turned to the old man. 'You shouldn't have rushed in like that: you can see it's dangerous.'

The old man wasn't listening. He was slowly shifting his gaze across the ruins of the building. 'He was the only one killed, wasn't he?' he asked.

The sergeant shrugged. 'Possibly, sir.' He glanced uneasily to where his men were waiting for him. 'I have to go now, but thank you, Doctor: we couldn't have stopped them without you.'

The old man did not reply and the sergeant disappeared off through the dust. For a moment the old man stood there alone amid the wreckage thinking to himself, a tear creeping down his face. Then another, smaller figure suddenly appeared in his line of sight.

'Grandfather!' a girl's voice cried.

'Susan!' the old man shouted angrily. 'I told you to stay behind!'

The girl ran to her grandfather and hugged him tightly. 'I was worried about you, with the building falling and everything...'

'Yes, yes child,' said the old man, deeply touched and yet embarrassed by this display of affection.

The girl looked up at his face and gasped. 'What's wrong, grandfather? I've never seen you so upset before.'

Feeling suddenly weary, the old man sat down on a half-demolished wall. 'The building wasn't empty after all. One of them was still inside. Those army people took him away just now.'

The girl sat down beside her grandfather and hugged him again. 'You weren't to blame, grandfather. You didn't know.'

'Perhaps, perhaps not.' He looked down into her eyes, those eyes which stared up at him with such conviction and trust. 'I don't know what lies they told you about me back home, child, but in all my time I have been responsible for the death of not one soul, however evil or worthless. Indeed I saved many who deserved death. But now...'

'Grandfather...' murmured the girl, trying to find some words of comfort and failing.

'A death is a terrible thing... terrible... and to have been its cause, albeit unintentionally....'

'You mustn't blame yourself...'

The old man stood up resolutely. 'We have to leave now, Susan, and get away from this time. It would be foolish to linger: those soldiers will start asking questions now this shameful business is over.'

The girl stood up and began to lead the way about of the rubble. At the edge of the debris, the old man looked back at the scene of devastation.

'I cannot change what has happened today,' he said slowly. 'That man died and I never knew him. I will learn more about him: what steps led him to this place. I owe that to his memory, at least.' He smiled sadly. 'I never even knew his name.'

Painting History

By

Damon Cavalchini

There was a period of my life when I could open my eyes and see time in all its naked glory. The possible, the probable and the inexplicable all stretched out in front of me like a giant Escheresque canvass. Civilisations' births and inescapable deaths spread out in glorious Technicolor. Time, for me, was not some linear event where A followed B with rigid regularity. Nor was it a giant oroborous swallowing its own tail for infinity. I could look out and see the big picture in the truest sense of the phrase. Empires, wars, entire galaxies were simply streams of paint spread out for my enjoyment. It was beautiful, impersonal and expansive.

To me time was a multicoloured mural in which I amused myself forever by looking at the indistinct majesty of the shapes while ignoring the numerous imperfections of the canvas.

Then I met the Doctor and he introduced me to the beauty of the speckles.

The wound wept blood. There was no other way to describe the trickle of life passing through its injuries. Her white throat slit, in a single deadly blow, from left to right. In time, medical authorities would determine that it was this single blow which killed her. However it would take them days to confirm it. A detailed study of the crime scene would later reveal the presence of some unknown blood. This unexplained sample would eventually be matched to that of another victim, murdered only hours before the current atrocity. Cold, hard facts would gradually accumulate as the authorities added more and more pieces of paper to a manila folder with 'The Slasher' scrawled across its cover with a heavy marker pen.

But, despite the growing mass of the folder, the girl would still be dead.

Flickering street lamps glowed above her desiccated body. A waxing moon fought for luminescence against the unnatural light emanating from the planet below it. A thick, red trail marked the distance the body had been able to traverse before her will to fight had drained away. Her killer had left the scene believing she had already died. Already her skin had begun to assume a pale hue as life's precious liquid seeped slowly away.

Interlinking strands of DNA, multiplied by millions, formed a slow but steady gorge as they flowed towards their final resting-place. A faint thrill of warmth, stored up during the day before, escaped from its concrete prison, causing the dying woman to revive momentarily but ultimately failing to lead her to Rome.

'Excuse me.'

DCI George Mathieson regarded the strange man kneeling on the ground, cradling the mutilated body, with a look of amused interest.

'Good evening officer, I'm the Doctor and you've got a problem.'

Mathieson watched as the man gently lowered the dead body to the ground. The Doctor - and Mathieson was the first to admit he had this funny bias against people who used titles instead of names - didn't even have the grace to look nervous. If anything, Mathieson thought he looked angry. But not killer angry. No, the strange man's look reminded Mathieson of the faces he sometimes saw standing outside of local courthouses where particularly nasty crimes were being tried.

A reluctant sense of duty made the DCI switch his gaze from the Doctor to the corpse even though the inspector already knew what he would see. Victim number 4. Tomorrow's headlines would be screaming about the insane serial killer wandering the streets while the police blundered about in the dark. Again. With a resigned sigh

Mathieson admitted to himself that most people don't normally attempt to perform impromptu renal removals on themselves without expert medical help.

Curious then that the strange man claimed to be a Doctor.

For a moment Mathieson imagined announcing to the world that he had caught the Slasher red-handed in the truest sense of the phrase. The media would chuckle appreciatively at his morbid humour, secretly pleased that he had given them a perfect sound bite for the 6 o'clock news. It was absolutely perfect. A clean-cut case that even Perry Mason couldn't knock over. So why, Mathieson wondered, didn't he believe a word of it?

Deciding the Doctor wasn't really going to be much of a threat at the moment, the inspector took a step towards the man with the curly blonde hair who remained fussing over the body until a sudden squelching sound stopped him.

Producing a pencil from one of the many pockets of the fashion-impaired monstrosity he wore, the Doctor leapt forward and scrapped something from the bottom of inspector's shoe and studied it for a few seconds.

'Lower intestine,' he declared dismissively as he wiped the pencil clean and replaced it in his pocket.

Mathieson's instinctive protest at the Doctor's destruction of the crime scene was lost as a cool eddy of wind took hold of the dirt and scattered the rubbish lying on the ground, waltzing it towards the tattered brick of the surrounding walls. A half-used cigarette caught in the victim's hair dragging Mathieson's attention back to her. A short leather skirt was lowered at the hip, revealing a tattoo of a dragon, and torn as if her attacker could not wait to remove it.

'Pretty, wasn't she?'

Mathieson was shocked to find the Doctor suddenly standing behind him. He moved quietly, too quietly for a man of his bulk in the DCI's opinion.

'Yeah.'

Four victims in less than two months. All violent. In almost every case, the victim's clothing had been ripped near the hip, exposing a tattoo of a Chinese dragon. In fact the only exception had been the victim earlier tonight. It was almost as though the killer had erred and picked someone without a tattoo by accident. Still, the Slasher had got it right on this second attempt.

'Those who glisten with the glory of the hummingbird.'

Mathieson blinked as the Doctor's words interrupted his musings.

Seeing the inspector's confusion, the Doctor sighed. 'Never mind.'

The DCI shrugged. He was smart enough to acknowledge that the victims must have had a reason not to fear of their attacker. Once again he found himself wondering about the ease with which he had decided to trust this strange Doctor.

The Doctor let out a heartfelt groan as he saw the gleam of suspicion flicker over Mathieson's face. 'Oh, no. Not again. I'm really going to have to do something about this.'

With a sudden frenzy of energy, the Doctor started to pace around the alley upturning rubbish bins like a demented Sherlock Holmes in search of a vital clue.

'A danger detector, that's what I need. Some sort of device which will alert me to the presence of recently murdered bodies, escaped spies with deadly secrets, or freedom fighters fleeing whatever totalitarian regime happens to be in power.'

'I see,' Mathieson moved to join the Doctor and to try and stop him from totally destroying the crime scene before the forensic team had even finished setting up their equipment. However after a brief burst of activity the Doctor seemed to give up his mysterious search in disgust. Wisely, the inspector decided not to ask what the Doctor had been trying to discover.

'And just what were you doing here at this most fortuitous moment?'

'Parking my TARDIS.'

The Doctor must have noticed the puzzled look on the inspector's face because he quickly added, 'The policebox thing over there.'

For the first time the policeman noticed the anachronistic relic. Police telephone boxes had been obsolete for years now. And the Doctor said he parked it as if the police box were some sort of magic VW?

The plaintive wail of stray cat broke the silence and the Doctor bent over to pick it up. As soon as the animal was in the Doctor's arms, it fell quiet instinctively knowing it was safe. Scratching it behind the ears, the Doctor seemed to have forgotten about the horror of the body lying behind him. One officer with more than 30 years experience had been physically sick when they found the first victim last month. It was only familiarity with the killer's style that allowed Mathieson to keep the remnants of the particularly bad curry he'd wolfed down for dinner inside his stomach. Yet this civilian seemed completely unperturbed by the slaughter in front of him. With a deep sigh, Mathieson gave up on the stranger and walked over to see what the forensics squad had discovered.

'What did the notes say?'

Startled, Mathieson spun round on his right heel.

There had been no mention of the notes in any media coverage of the killings. In fact, only a few people outside of the investigating team knew anything about them. So how on Earth did a total stranger know about their existence?

Unless Mathieson had been wrong and the Doctor wasn't as innocent as he seemed.

'Oh come on man, there must have been notes. Every deranged killer loves to taunt the police. Don't you read the classics? You know -' the Doctor's voice dropped to conspiratorial whisper, drawing Mathieson closer to him as he struggled to hear, '- I came here for a holiday. For the last few weeks I have been unable to shake a melancholic foreboding that something was calling me. Some fragment of memory from my forgotten past posing a riddle that I had neglected to answer.'

'So you were feeling depressed? So what? People do that all the time.'

The Doctor regarded Mathieson with a look of complete contempt.

'I am not, and never have been, people. And I am not depressed. I was simply expressing an aspect of my more contemplative nature. It would take a typically shortsighted, narrow-minded bureaucrat such as yourself to fail to recognise the difference. Imagine your own pathetic little twinges of angst and weigh them against the stones of the centuries that lie heavily upon my shoulders. As a Time Lord, one of the guardians of history, the cosmic angst which occasionally engulfs my soul dwarfs any meagre inklings of melancholy you might even begin to suspect you suffer.[1]

Time Lord. That explained it, Mathieson thought. This guy was seriously nuts.

The Doctor however ignored the different police scurrying about the site and began to pace out a circle like an overblown Olivier hitting his marks.

'What I need is a holiday. A real holiday. No gumblejacks or trips to the glories of the Eye of Harmony, the belt of Orion, or the coat of Benji or whatever. No leisure planets or deserted oasis under the triple suns of Boredom. A leisurely break sequestered amongst the sandstone academia of Bakerton University's hallowed halls. No monsters, rebellions or Galactic villains to be overcome. Just a nice hot spa and a place which serves triple coated chocolate ice-cream. And the ethereal pleasure and reassurance of history's warm companionship.'

A couple of other police had stopped their investigation to stare at the Doctor. Mathieson shook his head at them and motioned for them to get back to work.

'Sounds boring.'

'Wonderfully, safely, invigoratingly boring. I need time to recharge my batteries. I mean, do you know how draining it is to go running around saving the Universe from total destruction every second week? You humans never seem to realise the efforts I go to on your behalf. Sometimes I think I should just leave whoever wants to take over this wretched little planet this week to get on with it.'

Mathieson, however, was not paying any attention to the Doctor. Instead he was mentally composing his report on the murder. The suspect, Mathieson's imaginary pen began to write, was clearly suffering from extreme delusions and, in the DCI's opinion, was incapable of committing the murder.

Gradually it dawned on him that the Doctor had stopped speaking and seemed to be waiting for a response.

'And you just decided to start this great relaxing holiday in a dead-end alley in the early hours of this fine September morning? And, by some weird cosmic coincidence, there just happens to be a recently dead body just lying there?'

'I told you. I was parking my TARDIS.'

'Oh, that's right. The police box taxi service.'

The Doctor nodded. 'So, it's September, is it? You wouldn't happen to know the date by any chance. I've been travelling for a bit and my international clock is a bit haywire.'

'Listen, Doctor whoever you are, I've got four dead bodies on my hands.' He started to tick his grievances off with his fingers. 'The Chief Constable and the media want a quick arrest. And now I've got a prime witness who, if he isn't really the murderer, claims he magically appeared in an outdated police telephone box the like of which hasn't been seen for years and, shock horror, failed to see anything of the slightest use to my investigation. I mean, honestly, are you the Real McCoy or what?'

'The Real McCoy -' the Doctor replied condescendingly, '- was an American boxer and alleged actor who shot his mistress because she refused to marry him. He was eventually jailed for the attack but only on the charge of manslaughter after he successfully argued that boxing had damaged his brain. He eventually committed suicide in 1940 after marrying yet another woman leaving nine widows, alive or dead, behind him.'

Disdainfully the Doctor bent down and picked a piece of discarded newspaper off the ground. Glancing at the rumours of another royal sex scandal, a lost corgi on Tottenham Green and the latest sport star marriage to a popular TV actress, he was about to throw it back on the ground when he suddenly stopped. It simply wasn't possible. He looked at the date again, September 30, 2007, and sighed, knowing that his holiday plans would have to wait.

'So, as you can see, I am not the Real McCoy. Now are you going to get down to the business of charging me with a crime I did not commit so I can get on with escaping and clearing my name?'

Mathieson shrugged.

'Actually I was thinking my psychiatrist might want to take you to dinner.'

The Slasher, as the media had so charmingly named Mathieson's killer, stared at the montage on the wall with a perverted sense of pleasure. Photographs covered the plain white pre-fabricated walls like pieces of speckled paint. They were all of the same girl. Images of her talking to her friends, buying a soft drink, getting out of a car. Simple, normal, everyday images that had no place on this obscene tableau. In the centre of the montage was a calendar.

Four circled dates, four sudden deaths. Beside the calendar was another photograph, this time of a group of girls. One by one, the Slasher had run a single line through each of them. Only two remained unblemished. Almost lovingly, the murderer selected a picture from those on the wall and he stuck to the calendar over November 9.

The Doctor heard David's ribs shatter, snapping like dry twigs, as the Slasher's knee slammed into the man's stomach. The young man's brown eyes opened wide with pain and fear. Unable to prevent it, the Doctor watched helplessly as David's blood created a black stain on his blue shirt as though a malignant black hole had opened in his chest. Holding the knife at David's throat the Slasher leant over his prostrate body.

'Well, Doctor, what are you going to do to stop me this time?'

The Time Lord bit back a sarcastic remark and the Slasher began to laugh hysterically. The blind realisation that the Slasher liked to inflict pain hit the Doctor with the force of a run away train.

David's breathing had quickened and become much more shallow. Despite the cool breeze wafting in through the open window, sweat pored off his body.

And, the Doctor thought to himself, it had started out as such a promising evening.

The food at supper had been adequate but boring. At first the conversation had also been less than entertaining. But as the evening wore on, the Doctor found himself regaling the three humans with tales of his intergalactic adventures. He wasn't quite sure they believed him but it certainly made for a more interesting time. After a while Judy Myers, their host, had declared herself too tired to keep her eyes open and retired to her room upstairs. The spare room had been claimed by the other guest, Mary Langton, leaving the Doctor and David to argue about who would get the sofa.

All in all, it had been a pleasant waste of time. Still, he decided to himself, time waits for no man and he should push things along a bit. So, without consulting David, the Doctor spun round and followed Mary into the guestroom.

'You know, if you keep ignoring David and I, you're going to die tonight,' announced the Doctor as he strode into the room without bothering to knock.

As soon as he glanced around his surroundings, the Doctor knew Judy Myers' spare bedroom was never going to make the photo spread in the Better Homes and Gardens Winter Special. The couch, which folded out to become a bed, was obviously designed for convenience not comfort. A metal clothes' horse rested against a pine coloured wall. A deep rut in the carpet showed where it had been temporarily displaced from in a failed attempt to tidy the room.

'I beg your pardon?'

Mary stared at the two men in amazement as she quickly pulled her T-shirt into place. David had trailed in sheepishly as if he were a piece of flotsam caught in the Doctor's wake. An apologetic smile flickered across his face that turned into a grimace as the Doctor immediately started to search through Mary's belongings. When Mary snatched her overnight bag from his hands the Time Lord looked like a spoilt child who had just had his favourite toy taken away from him.

When he had first met the Doctor, a Doctor who looked completely different to this one, about ten years ago, David had had difficulty believing the man was an alien Time Lord who was at least nine hundred years old. Strangely enough it wasn't the way the Doctor had just barged in and defeated an attempt by a mad scientist to introduce an alien parasite into the human population which had convinced him of the Doctor's other worldly qualifications. No, it was the man's complete lack of social graces that tipped the balance in favour of his alleged extra-terrestrial origins. The Doctor preferred a direct approach to problems and just assumed the rest of world was keeping up with him as his mind played hopscotch with reality.

'Break it to her gently I said,' David complained to no-one in particular. 'Make her see the funny side I said. But no, out you burst with a blunt statement of fact. Doctor, you sure have a lot to learn about women.'

Mathieson's psychiatrist, as the policeman's fellow officers had nicknamed David, was actually nothing of the sort. In fact, the young man was a tutor in Victorian criminal history out at Bakerton University. A couple of years back the DCI had been having a bit of trouble with the regular police psychologist and David had stepped in and made a guess. A good one as it turned out and the two had formed an unofficial partnership. Whenever he needed some 'extra' help, Mathieson called in the academic.

Dressed in the T-shirt and loosely fitting shorts she wore to bed, a toothbrush hung from Mary's mouth like an oversized cigar giving David the impression of a female Groucho Marx.

'Tell it to the court, buddy. I was planning on finishing up my nightly duties and then curling up in bed with a Tom Clancy. You two didn't, don't, feature in my schemes at all.' She sat down on the edge of the bed. 'One more comment like that and I'm calling the police.'

Instead of being cowered by the threat, the Doctor nodded vigorously as he sat down beside her. 'Good idea. Yes, Mathieson and his crew should be informed as soon as possible that you're here.'

Amused, Mary looked over at David who, seeing the familiar question about the Doctor's mental health in her eyes, nodded helplessly.

'And you, what are you doing here? I mean aren't you supposed to be keeping him under control or something?'

'Not really.' David shrugged in a gesture of helplessness. 'I don't actually think anyone can keep the Doctor under control.

A metaphoric light bulb burst suddenly above Mary's head as she realised where she had seen David before. It was at a press conference out at the University. David had just published his first book, Killers and Corsets - a study of Victorian Criminal literature. Normally such a stupendous event would not have attracted even the most inexperienced probationary cadet, but David Holmes was a bit of a celebrity around Bakerton.

'That's right. You're the guy who's supposed to be Sherlock, or is it Mycroft, Holmes' great grandson.'

David let his body slouch against the wall, surrendering to the inevitable knowledge he'd had this conversation a million times.

'You solved that big quiz show and you were the guy who nabbed Kate Saunders.'

'Don't be stupid, I'm nothing like Sherlock Holmes,' he snapped angrily. 'I mean that quiz show stunt was blatantly obvious. Just a simple case of bad plotting and picking the most unlikely subject. As for Kate -' David stopped as if weighing up how much to say. 'Detection is, or ought to be, an exact science.'

'You play the violin,' Mary reminded him.

'Viola.'

'Same thing.'

David moved awkwardly towards the window. Outside, rain fell silently against the glass, each droplet creating a unique mosaic.

'Look, there's no mention of a Sherlock or a Mycroft in my family tree. There's no Wolfe or Raffles or any other fictional character. To be honest, there's no mention of my great grandfather at all. All I do know is that my great grandmother's name was Agatha Escott and that she apparently got herself into trouble with a gardener about nine months before my grandfather appeared.'

'Too bad,' Mary moved to put a hand on his shoulder but he shook her off. 'My great grandfather was Russian. Vassily Konovalov. That was his name.'

'Family -' interrupted the Doctor, lazing back on the bed, '- has a lot to answer for. Expectations, bad genes, acne. It's all hidden in your genetic code. Sometimes, living up to your family name can be a curse. Take young David here.' The Doctor gestured broadly at his friend. 'Just being associated with the Holmes name denies him his own personal reality. His identity is framed in people's minds by the popular image of the great detective. That he happens to share his literary predecessor's gift for deduction is simply another mill stone around his neck.'

'The last time I saw Kate,' David began, his voice quivering with emotion. He seemed about to continue but his eyes locked on to the Doctor's deep gaze. But this sanctuary could not last forever and the memories slowly took control.

Once again, David saw himself fall, panting against the tree. Even after all this time, he can still remember the rough bark biting at skin through his sweat soaked shirt. He watched as his memory-self made dragon mist with his breath in the blossoming rays of dawn. Like a child hiding in a playground he recalled the wonder he felt as the damp touch of nature's morning dew mingled with his perspiration. Then the memory came crashing through his mind like a derailed train without any brakes.

And kissed him full on the lips.

David imagined his physical body trying to hold on, to anchor his place in the

present, to prevent his mind going down this well-

worn trail, but the past reached out and grabbed him with time's unbreakable grip.

Ten years ago, the smell of burning flesh assaulted his stomach. As the wooden church collapsed around them he could still see Kate standing there, screaming in pain and desperation, as the heat enveloped her. Her once smooth flesh bubbled as he watched helplessly and blisters exploded across her lovely face. Again and again his mind replayed the moments as her hair melted to her skull. Until he could see nothing but the same vivid memory playing continuously in his dreams. The image of the black husk which once housed the girl he loved.

At the time he remembered clinging to the Doctor, holding the alien back from the flames.

'Let me help her. Please, David, I can save her. '

But David just clung silently to the Doctor like some giant baby clutching at a deserting parent. He already knew the smouldering corpse in front of him had killed his lover long before this moment.

Then, as if some malevolent TV station had decided to repeat the replay for eternity, David watched as the Doctor broke free of his grasp and raced towards Kate with a burst of inhuman energy.

Too late. It was always too late.

Not even the Doctor could fight against the passion of the flames as they forced him back. Each step a *painful retreat into failure.*

For the rest of his life David would remember the Doctor turn to face him with a look of devastated horror and a single question in his eyes. *Why?*

But at eighteen years of age David didn't have the words to explain it. Even now, a decade later, he could not describe what had happened. After all he let someone die because he loved her too much and saw her silent plea for release. He still lacked the skill to explain to her family that the alien parasite inside her mind had rotted away the real Kate Saunders until there was nothing left but an empty Volvo *waiting for its inhuman driver to take the wheel.*

And finally David remembered the Doctor take the weeping boy in his arms and stroking his hair. He remembered drawing a breath and gagging on the all-pervading stench of destruction. He remembered how his stomach rebelled and purged itself right there in the ashes. Barely a legal adult he would be scarred for eternity by the events which had led him here.

Distracted by David's obvious pain, Mary was shocked to discover the Doctor had resumed rummaging through her overnight bag. Hitting him on the arm, she snatched it off him. Like a sulky child, he jumped up off the bed and went to stand in the corner of the room.

'That's one of the big problems with humanity. You've lost your sense of perspective about what's important. You've forgotten all the good reasons to respect people and turned being real into an industry. Television, movies, books, they are all about creating fantasies for others to live their lives against. The religion of the masses. Look at the way you idolise rock stars. Examine the way you need to know every little piece of trivia about a movie star's love life. It's pathetic and childish. I mean, really!'

For an instant, Mary pictured some Darwinian boffin standing in front of her explaining the inevitable collapse of the human race to a group of embryonic cockroaches.

'Let's get back to me for the moment. According to Nostradamus here -' she leant back, stretching out on the bed, '- I'm about to die a hideous and painful death. You do know there's only one way to know the time someone's going to die? And that's to kill them.'

'Me. A murderer?' The Doctor exclaimed. 'Do you know how many billion sentient lifeforms owe their continued existence to me? What cold and hungry blade is the unforgiving nature of the beast? Confined by it's own ignorance to lurk within the souls of man.'

'Poetic.'

Of course, Mary wasn't actually correct when she said there was only one way to know if a person was going to die. I mean, fora time traveller like the Doctor or myself, all we have to do is come from some future point after the person's death and have some knowledge of that death. David, for example, is due to die in a car accident. I don't quite recall all the details of his demise but I can remember it happened. Will happen. Whatever.

'Besides, I said nothing about the manner of your death.'

The Doctor suddenly sprang back onto the bed next to Mary and grabbed at the edge of her shorts, pulling them down to reveal her hip. David watched in total amazement as she flung him off with a surprising amount of strength.

'What the hell do you think you're doing? What kind of demented pervert are you?'

But the Doctor ignored her. Instead he focussed completely on David.

'Did you see it?' the Doctor demanded.

'Did I ever,' he replied, grinning. 'But why did you stop there?'

Nonplussed, the Doctor stared at his friend as if he were unsure what David meant.

'Yes I saw it, Doctor. I've seen it before, remember?'

Angrily, Mary swung her body off the bed and confronted David. 'No, not you. You haven't.'

The Doctor joined them and his bulky frame towered over Mary. 'The tattoo, you fool. Where did you get the tattoo?'

This time it was Mary's turn to be thrown by the question. This lunatic had attacked her because he objected to her tattoo?

'Grover's,' David answered, ignoring her distress. His voice was flat and unemotional. 'They all got them done on the last day of school in 1996. It was a symbolic thing. A way of saying the group would always be together. Kate had one. Anne had one. So did Megan and Sally. A small, oriental dragon design tattooed into the flesh of their left hip.'

'And you have one,' David acknowledged, looking directly at Mary. 'As does Judy. The last of The Crowd. I know it may seem like a useless little piece of trivia but that simple gesture seems to have put you into the path of a madman.'

'To a great mind -' the Doctor interrupted pompously, '- nothing is little.'

Outside, lightning flashed melodramatically briefly giving the three of them a hint of ghostly luminance. A few seconds later a boom of thunder rumbled through the room.

Friday, August 31st, in the year of our Lord two thousand and seven, Anne Rechenberg was mutilated in an alley leading to her house. Then eight days later, Saturday, September 8th Megan Clifford was slaughtered followed by Meredith Angelton and Sally Gray on September the 30th.

Since then the Slasher had been quiet.

But the Doctor knew it could not last. He knew the date, he could even guess the time, that the Slasher would strike again.

'The victims -' David continued dispassionately, '- were all school friends and all destined to die before they reached the age of 21.'

All except for Meredith Angelton, he added mentally to himself.

'It was the address on the notes sent to the police that finally tipped us off.'

As he talked the Doctor walked around the room as if he were a knight checking the battalions before a coming battle.

'Mathieson and his crew had already worked out that the Slasher was deliberately attacking the former in-crowd from Bakerton High. But the police couldn't figure out the pattern. They simply couldn't see the answer that was staring them in the face.'

At the time David had facetiously suggested the

Slasher's mummy wouldn't let him out on weeknights. After all, every killing occurred on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday night.

'I guessed what was going as soon as I saw the body and discovered the date.'

Meredith Angelton did not fit the pattern. She was not from Bakerton. She'd never met the other girls at school. And, most importantly, she did not have a tattoo. At first the police had dismissed her killing as copycat rip-off. Because she and Sally were killed on the same night, they initially dismissed her death as an unfortunate coincidence.

At least, she didn't fit the obvious pattern.

For David, Meredith's death was the final piece in the puzzle because it didn't fit. In many ways he thought that her death was the saddest of the lot. Unlike the other three girls, where David suspected there was some deeper motive behind the carefully stage-managed slaughter, Meredith had died pointlessly. The Slasher had thrown caution to wind and attacked with an animalistic violence which wasn't evident in the other killings as though the frenzy of destruction was the only reason behind the murder.

This death, this single, useless death, had served to crystallise his suspicions. Meredith Angelton was killed by a copycat killer as were the other victims.

But it was the address on the letter, 26 Dorsett Street, which confirmed his suspicions beyond doubt. Tonight, just as it was 119 years ago when a another madman stalked the streets of London, would be the last killing.

And, to his surprise, David discovered that the Doctor shared his wild theories. Mary, like Mathieson and everyone else, simply stared at them in disbelief. 'Are you telling me the Slasher is Jack the Ripper?'

'No. Of course not,' replied the Doctor agitatedly. 'The Slasher is merely using the Ripper's crimes to disguise their own identity. Besides copying the Ripper's style, slashing the victim's throat left to right, which is quite sensible by the way as it ensures a minimum of blood gets onto the killer, creates an image of the killer in our minds before any investigation even began.'

'But that's stupid. Why should he copy such a famous case?'

'To tease the police,' David answered. 'To say catch me if you can. Besides, the police never caught the Ripper. For years psychics, amateur detectives, historians, every man and their incredible crime-solving dog, has tried to solve the mystery of the Whitechapel murders. Imagine the kudos of being able to pull it off a second time. It would be a crowning success, if a somewhat private one.'

The Doctor closed his eyes and studied the inside of his eye lids. So much death. He could still remember feeling the young woman's cold body in his arms; her life faded away. One more meaningless loss. One more piece of grit in the mill of civilisation. For a people so enthused with life, humans seemed to always be finding new reasons to kill each other. But the Slasher didn't even need an excuse to kill. All it took was insanity.

'The simple fact -' David continued, '- is that the Slasher has signposted their every move. Where Sherlock Holmes is supposed to have failed I will succeed. Tonight the Slasher's career is finished.'

But the Doctor wasn't paying attention to his friend. Instead he was staring into the darkness outside the window. His alien eyesight scanned the shadows, searching for hints of movement. Trees swayed, the house creaked and a rustle of leaves alerted the Doctor to the presence of a police officer outside. Mathieson had kept his word. The faint drizzle continued to fall, playing a simple staccato beat on the roof. Somewhere out there, a billion lives continued unhindered by the events taking place here tonight.

'Don't you understand? We've all been looking for a madman. But he's not. There's a cold, rational reasoning hiding behind the madness of these crimes. The Slasher has been using the stigma of the Ripper crimes to manipulate the police, and us, from the beginning.'

He swung round angrily on the two humans, his pace increasing as the facts tumbled together in his mind. 'Think about it. How cleverly the Slasher has copied only those aspects of the Ripper killings that are generally agreed upon. It's so simple and I've overlooked the most obvious truth of all. Jack the Ripper, the leather apron, is shrouded by his own mythos.'

With a single, determined stride the Doctor walked towards Mary, his bulk dwarfing her slight frame.

'It's a question of motive. What if there's a greater similarity than we originally perceived?'

Catching up, David realised what the Doctor was talking about. 'There is a theory that the Ripper attacked his victims to cover up the real target of his madness, Mary Kelly.'

For a moment the Doctor imagined himself to be back in the thick smog of London's Whitechapel slums. A candle melted slowly to its death as the body of a disembowelled woman lay silently on the bed. Jack's final victim. Mary Jane Kelly. For some unknown reason she plied her trade at nights under the name Mary Ann Kelly as if the simple change could disguise who she was and what she had become.

'Some modern Ripperologists believe Kelly is the key to whole mystery of Jack the Ripper,' The Doctor continued. 'They believe Joseph Barnett, Kelly's ex-lover, had engineered the whole thing as an elaborate game of retribution. He had lived with Kelly at 26 Dorsett Street, note the address. He probably still had a key to let himself in on that fateful night.'

'November the ninth. The last of the accepted Ripper murders. The same date, the same day, as tonight.'

Barnett would have had a passing acquaintance with all the victims. Indeed, apart from Kelly, he would certainly have met his former next door neighbour and Ripper victim, Catherine Eddowes. Following this train of thought, it was the killer who provided the link between the victims. Those who believe this theory assume the Ripper wasn't an indiscriminate murderer but someone deliberately hunting down his victims to exact an insane revenge.

History repeating.

As the Doctor towered over Mary, his voice dripped with sympathy. There were six people in your little clique. Kate is dead. Megan, Anne and Sally have already become victims of the Slasher's madness. There's only Judy and yourself left.'

He paused, then said simply, 'And if you kill her tonight, you will die. I mean, the girl who was Mary Langton will sink further into the madness that is the Slasher. Is it worth it?'

Stunned by the Doctor's announcement Mary swung gracefully on her heel, produced a knife from beneath the pillow on the spare bed, and jammed it up against David's throat as she pressed him against the wall. The blade pricked at the taunt skin on his throat. A small red welt began to form below the pressure.

The Doctor watched, frozen by his concern, unable to move.

'Kate was your friend, wasn't she? You hung around together, shared experiences together, swapping gossip and boys. Then David let her die. This whole thing is all about revenge.'

As he spoke, the Doctor took a step forward but quickly moved backwards when Mary raised the angle of the knife at David's throat. 'Kate was a Someone. A name. You were popular, you were famous, because you hung with her. Without Kate, without that human key to the in-crowd, you didn't know who you were.'

Sweat dripped in David's eyes. His ragged breath becoming more shallow with every intake.

'I was me.'

Mary moved, slightly, changing the balance of her weight. One leg slipped behind David as her body wrapped itself sinuously around him.

'And who was that?' Righteous anger fuelled the Doctor's voice. 'A pathetic hanger- on with no skills, no talent and no hope? Afraid to live and be yourself? I know how you feel.'

His voice became mesmerisingly quiet as centuries of regret added to its timbre. 'More than anyone else on this planet I know how it feels to be someone other than yourself. To open your eyes and see a totally different person standing there to greet you.'

Five times before the Doctor had experienced the change of self as his damaged metabolism repaired itself. Five different personalities. This one, his sixth, had been the hardest. When he had first reawakened after the disaster on Androzani, his entire frame of reference had collapsed. It was only because he had Peri there, an outside influence to provide him with context, that he had re-established his grip on reality.

Without the help of the companions who had seen him through the renewal, who knew what madness might have taken over his mind?

'Memories shape how we see the world, how we perceive ourselves. Imagined slights, half-remembered conversations, dreams and fantasies, they all dictate our own personal realities. Sometimes a simple rumour or story can change reality. Being part of the in-crowd can wipe away the guilt, the loneliness, the self-doubt. But take that crutch away and who are you? I know. I, too, have been an outcast.'

Eyes locked on David, Mary answered quietly. 'I was one of them. We were The Crowd. When Kate took this thing as a lover we were shocked. A jumped up nerd with delusions of grandeur.'

'Sticks and stones,' David croaked.

'You killed them.' Any trace of sympathy had vanished from the Doctor's voice. He had almost killed Peri in the birth pangs of his current incarnation. But he hadn't. He had stopped.

Mary paused. 'They deserved to die. Kate was their friend. She made us. Gave us credibility. Gave us power. People grovelled to us, wanted to know me. Then, when this cretin turned her in, they deserted her. Cut her loose. Modern Peters betraying their Jesus.'

But, not me, Mary thought to herself, repeating the mantra that had kept her focused as the blood had poured from the bodies of her friends.

Suddenly her elbow slammed into David's

stomach.

'No. I didn't turn,' she screamed as he fell solidly onto the floor. 'I remained, I remain, loyal.'

Mary swung her body over him, her weight and gravity combining to cannon into his fragile body. The Doctor heard David's ribs shatter, snapping like dry twigs, as her knee slammed into his stomach. The young man's brown eyes opened wide with pain and fear. Unable to prevent it, the Doctor watched helplessly as David's blood created a black stain on his blue shirt as though a malignant black hole had opened in his chest. Jerking in pain David instinctively tried to sit up but Mary remained unmoved, the knife still at his throat.

'Well, Doctor, what are you going to do to stop me this time?'

The Time Lord bit back a sarcastic remark as Mary began to laugh hysterically. The blind realisation that she liked to inflict pain hit the Doctor with the force of a run away train.

David's breathing had quickened and become much shallower. Despite the cool breeze wafting in through the open window, sweat pored off his body.

'Feeling better?' She cried exaltedly. Her voice dropped to a whisper, mimicking the Doctor, as she pressed her lips tantalisingly close to David's ear. 'Does the danger excite you? Is that what's making you sweat?'

'Mary, put the knife away.'

'No, Doctor. He spoiled everything.' A petulant whine crept into her voice. 'Just like before. He deserves to suffer. To have his name dragged through the mud. To have the framework of his life torn away from him.'

Mary placed her knee on David's broken rib. An involuntary flash of pain leapt across his features. God, this felt good, Mary thought as she drank in the intoxicating adrenaline rush of power which accompanied David's reaction.

Then she laughed. The thrill of the kill. One more ounce of pressure, one millimetre deeper and he's dead. That's real danger. To be able to see the fear in their eyes, to breath it in from their sweat. At this moment Mary felt as though she owned David's life.

'Sherlock bloody Holmes never caught the Ripper. Just what chance did this pale copy think he stood against me? This -' she leant over and kissed David's cheek '- thing doesn't even embrace his heritage. He wanted to be his own man instead of accepting that what they think of you is what really matters. No matter how nice, how sweet, how desirable you think you are, if other people don't agree with you then you aren't.'

Of course this wasn't the first time she had experienced the addiction of murder. Her previous victims, her former friends, had walked towards her like unsuspecting sheep to the slaughter. The delicious moment when she drew the metal blade across their throats. The instant when they realised, when they understood, that they were going to die.

Especially poor Meredith who didn't have a clue why.

A faint rustling sound reminded Mary of the Doctor's presence. The strange man added an extra spice to the meal. She remained a little uncertain of the Doctor but he was eccentric enough that no one would believe his story about what was happening here.

This makes you feel good?' The disgust in the Doctor's voice was enhanced by a hint of hopelessness and frustration.

'It makes me feel alive. It exhilarates me. To be the last thing they remember before they die. This makes me somebody. I am a somebody.' By the end of the sentence Mary was screaming the words with pleasure.

'It happened twice, didn't it?' Realisation dawned in the Doctor's mind. 'The loss of your claim to fame. You were once able to claim the infamy of being Jack the Ripper's great granddaughter. Then you were famous for being with Kate Saunders. You needed the fame. You needed the crutch. Why did Meredith have to die? Why did you have to recreate the Ripper's crimes with such precision? The other girls, you had a motive for them, however insane. But Meredith? Was it really necessary to make her death different just like Elizabeth Stride so many years ago? Did you really need to complete the pattern? Did she somehow recognise you? Or did you enjoy it?'

The Doctor's voice hardened.

'It will consume you. Just like your desire to be someone other than who you are consumed you. Lizzie Stride wasn't mutilated. You messed up. Or didn't you care? Was the kill that enticing by then that you couldn't restrain yourself any longer?'

Slowly, the Doctor turned his back on her and moved towards the open window.

'Who are you, Mary Langton? Where is the little girl who bounced preciously on her mother's knee? Where is the girl who sat at her grandfather's feet and listened to him tell stories about his father and pea-souper mists of London? Did you really have to become someone else to believe you were a real person?'

A desperate plan began to form in the Doctor's mind. He just hoped the police were still outside waiting for the moment when they would be needed.

If he could only unsettle the girl, to give David a chance. But he didn't know how.

The answer came from an unexpected quarter.

'Bah, you're still a nobody. A nothing.' David's voice quaked with pain and fear. But it was also laced with contempt. 'You're scum. You're nothing but dirt.'

'Get back.'

The Doctor had tried to edge forward again as David distracted Mary.

'Mary, Mary, quite contrary. Dress a-mess and armpits hairy.'

The rhythm of words wormed their way into Mary's head. Her hands trembled as the beat took her back to her early childhood days in the old schoolyard. Those days of torture and hell as she was ignored and picked on by the other girls. Years of childish cruelty and jokes swelled up in her mind.

'Shut up. That's not how it goes.'

Kate had saved her from all that. Kate had brought her from the grey loneliness of her existence and shown her how to live. Without Kate to defend her, to tell her what to do, Mary's life had once again imploded into a never-ending pattern of solitude.

And David had stood there and let her die.

At the time he didn't know he was watching Mary die as well.

Sensing Mary's defences were crumbling, David tried to move his body closer to her, pressing himself against blade she held. The knife bit into his throat but he ignored it.

The Doctor inched closer to the twisted spectacle occurring in front of him, waiting for his opportunity to act.

'When,' she demanded. 'When did you know it was me?'

'Tonight. We knew it had to be either you or Judy and, well, you seemed to be more likely suspect.'

The Doctor reached out a hand to touch her, to comfort her.

Til kill him. Don't touch me.'

The Doctor pulled his hands back and held them open towards her.

'Give it up, Mary. Be yourself.'

A tear formed slowly in her eye, causing her to blink. That one distraction was all David needed. Forgetting the pain, forgetting all about his own life, he forced his body into hers. The Doctor pounced as well, wrapping the weeping girl in his coat.

'I am someone,' she sobbed, crying like a pathetic baby bundled in the Doctor's grip. 'I am.'

She was crying now. All her defences gone. Mary Langton was again the little girl eating her sandwiches alone while the other girls ignored her.

'Yes, I believe you are,' the Doctor murmured.

But who, he wondered? Now that was the question.

Morning broke and the events of the previous night seemed to have been eons ago. David's ribs had been set and the local hospital had released him back into the wild to face the rest of humanity. Mathieson had arrested and charged Mary with the murder of her friends. Judy Myers, the intended victim, never knew that her former friend had planned to hunt her down.

As the Doctor generously overtipped the young man who'd brought them their coffees, Mathieson asked, 'How did you know?'

'Vassily Konovalov,' replied the Doctor and David in unison. After looking at the Doctor, David continued. 'Vassily Konovalov was a minor Russian nobleman who was, at the time, suspected of being Jack the Ripper. No-one really subscribes to this theory any more but a couple of encyclopaedias still mention his name.'

'But why go to such elaborate lengths just because your ancestor wasn't a murderer?'

'Because it allowed her to get revenge on everyone she blamed for her inability to work out who she was. She couldn't allow herself to be just another insane killer. She had to be special. Even when she conceived her grand scheme, she couldn't do it as Mary Langton, she had to be the Slasher.'

'The idea, obviously suggested by the similarity of dates, was to hide her motives in a forest of other motives. But it was more than that. She also wanted to destroy me for letting Kate die. But the Ripper never killed a man so I didn't fit neatly into her little fantasy.'

The Doctor took over the explanation. 'That's, of course, where she really excelled herself. Apart from her rather tenuous link to the Ripper killings through her great grandfather, she also knew David was an expert in Victorian criminal history. She knew he had a reputation as an amateur sleuth. Conan Doyle never gave us a decent Sherlock versus Jack story so she decided to make up for it as best she could.'

'It was a simple case of perfect timing, I guess.'

In the distance a clock struck the hour, its chimes sounding a reassuring trill of normality. Pushing his chair from under the table, the Doctor turned to David.

'It's time I was going. Walk me to the TARDIS?'

The alley, where the Doctor had arrived, more than a month ago now, looked completely different in sunlight. Fumbling for his key, the Doctor looked at the young man standing next to him.

'Places to see, people to rescue,' he started hesitantly. 'Want to come with me? There's no one else hanging about the TARDIS at the moment and, well, how do you fancy a quick whirl around the stars if I promise you'll be back before tea?'

David could hear the hopeful questioning in the alien's voice. It must be lonely to be that old, he guessed. So many memories.

'Sorry, Doctor. I've got a life of my own to live. A future of my own to forge. If there's one thing I've learnt it's that I've got to get on with being me.'

Silently the Doctor accepted David's response and, without another word, closed the TARDIS doors behind him.

To me, time is a canvas to be experienced. The rumbling blurs of traffic rushing along the road in streaks of red and green and blue. The way David, distracted and questioning whether he should have accepted the Doctor's offer, walked along the road was a rather pleasant pink. Then came the moment when he didn't look properly, didn't see the rapidly approaching car. I can see the driver glance down to change the station on his radio. The impact. The deep red ochre of his blood.

Letting the image fade on my monitor, the Doctor, sighs.

'Well, old girl, at least I tried. '

He vanishes into the depths of my care, still *unaware of the truth.*

You see, time is an unfinished canvas and I'm a painter. Correcting, adjusting, nudging and sometimes covering over the images that I dislike. Adding a little flash of blue where it is most needed.

And, as for the Doctor? Well, every painter has their favourite brush.

Present

We've already defined the present as an axis, a cobweb in time strung between the traveller and the homeworld, tying the prodigal to Gallifrey not just by the bio/technological minutae of his journey but by the mechanics of time itself. Yet, at the same time, the present can't even be said to exist. We all acknowledge this, at some level. We perceive the present moment, but by the time the data arrives in our nervous systems we're already processing it as part of the past, and the avalanche of the new present is already bearing down on us.

This is a basic scientific truth, of course. But the truth is useless to us as sentient beings. After all, we'd lose our sanity if we seriously tried to keep it in mind.

As all attempts to mathematically model an Absolute Present have so far resulted in failure and embarrassment, we might consider erecting a kind of scaffold around ourselves, a framework of the present rather than a definite point. So, our new definition of the present becomes: "any expanse of time which is of reasonable size for us to consider at any given moment". The question is, where do we draw the boundaries of this new Empire of Now?

Some of you will one day become Time Lords.

Some of you will experience multiple lives. Each life will have its own genetic protocols, and each will have its own train of thought woven into its bio-history; every regeneration a psychological mutation of the last, a method of thinking made flesh. Thus, it might be helpful to define the present as a slice of time which contains one particular "mind set", one period of consciousness, covering one or (at most) two regenerations. Being Time Lords, these periods might last for decades, perhaps even centuries. Our trains of thought are longer than most.

So, naturally, our presents can seem to last forever.

- *Prinicipia Prinicipalis,* third item on the recommended reading list, Arcalian Chapter Pre-Academy Induction School (suggested reading age: five years, two months).

Black Snow

By

David Bishop

Mike Watkins was running and he didn't understand why. His arms were pumping back and forth, hands clenched into fists, knuckles white from the pressure. His legs seemed to have a life of their own, propelling him through the thistles and high grass covering the wind-lashed moor.

His heart was thumping in his chest, pulsing the urge to run through his body so fast he felt dizzy and disoriented. Two burning cauldrons were aflame where his lungs had once been. He could feel them scorching the inside of his chest. They seemed to be throwing blood up into his throat, a taste sickening and metallic.

But worst of all was the fear, like rods of cold steel plunging into his body. Deadening, inescapable, stifling the breath from him. This couldn't be happening, the police sergeant kept telling himself, and yet he kept running. The horror behind him was closing in, far faster than he could ever hope to move across this uneven ground. But Mike knew he was only half a mile, perhaps less from the main route across the moors. If he could reach that, maybe he could hail a passing car, get some assistance, get away from the bleak terror of what pursued him.

The young soldier whistled tunelessly as his jeep hurtled along the roughly hewn moorland road. Up here, high in the hills, you could almost forget it was winter. The cold wind snapped at the senses but the sun gleamed through the scudding clouds. A glorious day to be alive.

The bulky walkie-talkie on the passenger's seat crackled into life, calling for his attention. 'Sentinel Three, where are you?' barked a stern voice, harsh and grating.

The soldier slipped his left hand around the walkie-talkie and pulled it to his face. 'Sentinel Three here. I'm returning to base, just finishing a final sweep of the test perimeter. ETA -' he paused to glance at his wristwatch. 'ETA three minutes.'

'Make it snappy, the test takes place at ten hundred hours whether you're back here or not. The boffins say -'

The young soldier never heard what came next. He had slammed both boots on the brake pedal to avoid a man running across the road in front of him. The sudden deceleration ripped the walkie-talkie from his hands, smashing it apart on the jeep's windscreen. The jeep shuddered to a halt and the soldier bolted from his seat after the pedestrian, already shouting. 'What the hell are you doing here? This is a restricted zone!'

But his quarry kept running, heading across the moor towards the centre of the forbidden zone. The running man was clad in dull green pullover and trousers, khaki callipers strapped round the top of his black leather boots. Tucked under one arm was a large white rectangle, but the pursuing soldier could not make out its nature or use. He increased his efforts and began closing the gap between them.

They crested the brow of the hill and a village came into sight below, its few streets deserted of people or vehicles. Suddenly the fugitive disappeared, dropping to the ground.

Without even thinking, Mike Watkins glanced back - and was lost. The tip of his steel- capped boot caught the edge of some small rock wedged in the tussock and he went down, heavily. The fall drove the last gasps of air from his chest and he lay helpless and panting, cowering on clammy soil. His regulation police uniform was soaked with sweat, the biting cold starting to freeze the material to his chest. Spittle flecked his greying moustache and his face was blotched red and white but his eyes remained clenched closed, screwed shut and shivering.

Perhaps if he couldn't see it, the horror wouldn't see him. Perhaps if he just lay here, small and quiet like a child, it would pass him by. But that was just delusion and he knew it would never succeed. Instead he willed open his eyes and looked up at what loomed overhead. Then the screaming began.

The soldier slowed the pace of his pursuit, scanning the tall grass for his quarry. He sighted the man squatting on the sloping hillside. The white rectangle was balanced across the man's knees and his left hand was moving quickly over its surface with bold, sure strokes. He was drawing.

'What the hell are you doing?' demanded the soldier as he fought to catch his breath.

'Sketching.'

'What?'

The squatting figure paused to look at the village below, then concentrated on the white pad beneath his hands. 'I'm sketching the village - before you fools do your worst to it.'

The young soldier decided not to think. Trying to reason with this individual would only cause further delay. He checked the time and moved to get a hold of this madman. 'This is a restricted zone. We've got less than a minute before this area is subject to a highly classified event. I don't know how you got through the security perimeter or how you even heard about this, but I've got to get you out of here -

now!'

The artist clambered to his feet, keeping a distance between him and the soldier. 'You fool! You don't ask questions, you just follow orders, don't you? I saw enough of what your kind of blind, unthinking obedience can do in the concentration camps at the end of the war. Well, I can see what's going on here - even if you can't!'

A warning klaxon cried out mournfully from the village below, following by a booming voice. 'Z-minus ten seconds!'

'Christ, it's too late!' the soldier gasped. He dropped to the ground, bunching his body into a ball, hands clasped over his eyes. 'Cover your eyes before it happens!' he shouted.

'Seven seconds, six seconds, five seconds...'

But the artist stood quite still, a charcoal stick gripped in his left hand over the page, eyes gleaming as they stared intently at the valley below. 'No, I want to see everything.

I want to capture the moment.'

'Three seconds, two seconds, one second...'

The young soldier heard a brief crump, like the sound of distant mortar fire, then he was engulfed in white light. Even with his eyes clenched tightly closed he could see the bones in his fingers, wrapped tightly over his face. He began screaming.

The sound of a human male screaming is curiously unearthly. Because it is rarely heard, the noise takes on a primal quality, both terrifying and sad. It whips up into the air, as though searching for release or relief. It is the sound of animal dying or in fear of death. It is a sound like no other of this planet, this world, this Earth.

The scream as Mike Watkins died reached out across the moors, as if searching for someone to hear his final cry. Just as it was fading away forever, the sound found a soul mate, a fresh noise rending the air. Just for a moment they mingled in a sonic entwining, a brief but audible embrace. Then the scream died away, leaving just the new sound, now becoming stringent as if calling out for its lost companion.

But the wheezing, groaning noise was alone. Unlike the scream of a human male, it was more obviously mechanical, almost a catalogue of events and efforts summed up in one keening alien cacophony. The sound of something impossible being made to happen. The whine of protesting machinery, forced into performing miracles for occasions beyond reckoning. The cry of the air, being torn apart to accommodate an unexpected presence. The grinding of reality taking hold. The final, off-tempo thump of arrival, of one journey ending and another beginning.

To accompany this unearthly noise, an incongruous object had appeared on the moors. A tall blue box now existed where nothing had been but moments before, a light flashing atop the structure. Three decades before this object had been a common enough sight in more metropolitan parts of the country. Near the top were emblazoned the words POLICE PUBLIC CALL BOX, and below a set of instructions had been fixed. To the right of these was a door, which opened inwards. Two travellers had arrived.

'Your friends are here.' The voice was like parchment, dry and thin, yet made up of many fragments. A voice formed by a lifetime of experience, now worn and aged. There was a hollowness about the vowel sounds, at once arch and noble.

Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart felt the words following him like the creaking of the timbers as he paced the floor. The sound of this voice had haunted him for years, as he lay waiting for sleep to come, at times of great stress and sadness, at the edge of his conscience.

It was the voice that had brought him to Exford, a small village hidden among the hills of Exmoor. The retired Brigadier reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded old photograph. It pictured him standing by a humble stone monument on the village green.

He had only been in the army a few years then, still a young man, his spine straight and strong, his body supple, his face unlined. He could just make out a few wisps of hair proudly adorning his upper lip, his first attempt at growing a moustache. The old soldier glanced at himself in the mirror, and saw the ravages time had brought on his body. He felt the arthritis creaking in his joints, a sure sign of another cold snap coming. His hair had long since retreated back from his brow, the moustache now more grey than black. Even the shoulders were starting to hunch forward, gravity winning the battle over his ramrod-straight army posture.

'I said your friends have arrived,' repeated the voice. 'They're up on the moors.'

Lethbridge-Stewart turned from the mirror to look at the speaker. 'Are they safe?' he asked anxiously.

'Did you hear a noise, as we landed?' asked the young woman as she emerged through the blue doorway, stepping out onto the moor. At first glance, her gender was disguised by a bulky swathing of clothes. Khaki combat trousers tucked into a new pair of black Doc Martens, a military parka enveloping the figure from head to mid-thigh, a halo of fur pulled tight around the face. Just visible were bright, shining eyes, red cheeks without makeup and full, pouting lips. 'Professor?'

She turned to look back at the upright blue box as her fellow traveller emerged. In a city his attire would have been considered mildly eccentric. Atop the moors in harsh winter weather, it was simply foolish. He was clad in a brown jacket over a woollen vest with question marks stitched into it as a recurring design. Beneath, a white linen shirt and dark tie, along with brown check trousers and two-tone brown spats. A paisley silk scarf fluttered at his throat, while a straw hat was jammed on to his head, concealing hair of unruly black curls.

The raw, biting gusts of arctic air seemed to have little effect on his puckish features, offset by eyes deepened by melancholy. It was the face of a man who knew too much to be happy for long periods of time. 'Yes, Ace?'

The young woman realised the Doctor had not been listening again. Travelling with him was a curious business. At times he showed the glee of a child at discovering something new and exciting, yet he was prone to long periods of depression and silence, as if a great sorrow weighed upon his conscience. For an alien time traveller with a penchant for fighting injustice across the galaxy, the

Doctor was a right moody sod sometimes.

'I asked if you'd heard a noise when we landed? I thought I heard something like a cry or a scream,' ventured the young woman, looking around the barren horizon apprehensively.

'Hmm?' asked the Doctor absent-mindedly. 'Mmm - perhaps.' He patted the side of the tall blue box affectionately. 'Just getting on a bit, aren't you old girl?'

'Yes, I believe so. Only people from this village have gone missing - so far.' The arid, cracked voice paused, searching for words. 'The police sergeant is dead, not far from where your friends are. He lost control of his bowels just before the end, but I suppose that was the least of his worries.'

'How do you know these things?' pleaded Lethbridge-Stewart. 'You don't move from that bed, yet you talk about the deaths of those miles away from this room, this house, this bloody village!'

'Language, Alistair, language.' A wan smile played at dry lips. 'I may have lost my eyesight forty years ago, but there are other senses.'

'Why did you bring me back here?'

'This is my home, Alistair. We have unfinished business. Old wounds for two old men. You owe me that much -'

'But after all this time -'

'Especially after all this time! Especially now! Haven't you been listening to me?'

Deliberately "mishearing" what she said, Ace had decided, was the Doctor's favourite game. He called it part of his initiative tests. She had always hated tests at school. Sometimes she wondered why she hung around with him. Then again, how many girls from Perivaie got to travel across time and space? Most of her friends back home were still waiting on their final results, hoping for some escape from drab suburbia.

'So where are we?'

'England. South-west England to be more precise. The dying days of the twentieth century. We're hear to see an old friend.'

'Another one? I thought we'd just done that at Greenwich?'

'That was a social call. This is more serious,' he replied, striding purposefully off across the moor. Ace jogged to catch up with him. They linked arms and walked on together.

Down in the village, Mary Fisher sat crying by the monument. Her Mummy had been among the first to disappear. She had set off for Dulverton to do some Christmas shopping and never returned. That was three days ago. Mary had been staying with the nice policeman since but now he was gone too. He had promised he would come back but that was hours ago and now Mary was getting hungry and cold.

She pulled her pink cardigan tighter round her shoulders but the chill was inside her now, scary like when her Mummy forgot to leave the light on in the landing. Mary was scared of the dark. She didn't want it to swallow her up, like it had taken her Mummy.

Mary heard a noise behind her and couldn't help looking. It was her Mummy and Mary started running towards, wanting to give her a hug. But there was something wrong with Mummy. Her face was black down one side and her eyes didn't seem to open properly. One was empty inside.

'Mary, come to me Mary,' whispered her mother. As she spoke, worms slithered out of her mouth.

Mary screamed and ran.

'This place is like a ghost town,' grumbled Ace. She and the Doctor were standing in the centre of Exford, surveying the deserted village. The main road through town ran down from one hill and past the village green, crossed a stream via a drystone bridge then divided into two, each heading off uphill towards the moor. Lining one side of the road were a series of neglected cottages that had seen better days. At the end nearest the stream were a village store doubling as a post office, and an abandoned service station. Opposite were further cottages, along with a public house called the White Hart.

Exford was empty, bereft of traffic or pedestrians. The only noise came from the wind blowing between the cottages and the garage. Even the carpark of the White Hart was unoccupied, save for a dusty Landrover.

'Yes,' muttered the Doctor darkly. 'Hardly a soul left here.'

Ace spotted a faded flyer pasted to a lamppost. She began reading aloud from it. 'The District Council gives notice that Saturday the seventh is the final date for free transportation. Thereafter, residents will have to take any other items themselves during the billeting period.' She turned back to look at the Doctor. 'What's the date today?'

'The twenty-third.'

'Guess we're too late for free transportation then. What does it mean, billeting period?'

'It seems the people of Exford have gone away.'

'Bit of a disappearing act alright.' Ace noticed the door to the village shop was ajar. 'I'm just going to get a can of drink.'

The Doctor watched her go, before another movement caught his eye. The familiar face of

Lethbridge-Stewart was looking down at him from a first floor window in the White Hart.

Ace ventured into the store and coughed as her boots kicked up a cloud of dust. The floor, the counter, all the surfaces were covered in a fine layer of dust. The air was heavy with the stench of decay. Ace examined the display of confectionery but did not recognise any of the items. There was something eerie about the shop, she decided, along with the rest of the village. As if it had been abandoned in haste, but a long time ago.

'Ace!' the Doctor called from outside. He sounded worried and it took a lot to worry the Doctor. Ace stepped back on to the street carefully to find him staring at a little, barefoot girl.

'Do you know where my Mummy is?' asked the child. She was pulling at the button on her woollen cardigan, a simple blue dress underneath stained with dried blood - a lot of it. 'Did the bad men take her away forever?'

'What bad men?' asked Ace, walking towards the little girl. A warning sign from the Doctor caught the corner of her eye and she paused.

'Bad men like him!' replied the child, pointing past them. They turned to see Lethbridge-Stewart emerge from the White Hart on to the street. Ace recognised him at once from an escapade involving knights, spaceships and King Arthur. Lethbridge-Stewart was a former colleague of the Doctor, an old soldier who'd come out of retirement for one final battle. Ace and the Brig had clashed, but that was just generational. He was like an old uncle, upright and formal but with a twinkle in his eye.

She was shocked by the change in him. Perhaps only three or four years had elapsed in the life of Lethbridge-Stewart since they had last met, but it looked more like a decade, as if all the years and the adventures had caught up with him at once. His face was pale and drawn, and his eyes were ringed with black and grey, as if he hadn't slept for days.

'He's not a bad man,' said Ace, turning back to the little girl - but the child had gone. The Doctor hardly noticed, just went to his old friend, concern etched into his features.

'Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart!' he said, shaking the old man's vigorously. It was clear to Ace from the expression on their faces that this was to be no happy reunion.

The disappearances had started a few days previously, the Brigadier explained to them once the trio had moved inside the White Hart. They sat around a roaring fire in the deserted public bar, while he talked about what had been happening in Exford.

'At first, I'm told, nobody paid any attention when

one of the villagers went away
suddenly. Christmas is only a few days away and the locals normally go into Dulverton or even Taunton for their shopping.'

'Christmas?' asked Ace, looking around the dusty bar. 'You'd hardly know it from looking at this -' A look from the Doctor brought her up short. She snapped her mouth shut and let the Brigadier continue.

'But the disappearances continued until the village was almost deserted when I arrived yesterday. So I called you for help, using the gadget you left me after that business at Vortigern's Lake.'

'But why are you here, Alistair?' asked the Doctor.

'Sir Terrance called me, said he needed my help. His housekeeper and home help all disappeared along with the others. I rushed straight down here, leaving Doris back at home. She was quite upset, I can tell you,' confided the old soldier.

'I can imagine.'

'Who's Sir Terrance?' asked Ace, fast losing impatience with the Doctor's softly softly approach to gleaning the facts. She sometimes wished there was a way of editing other people's conversations, like the remote control for a video player. Fast forward through the boring bits, get to what you really wanted to hear.

'Sir Terrance Adams. He used to be a war artist for the ministry, quite a famous one in his day,' said the Brigadier. 'He was among the first into the concentration camps during the Second World War. Left him a very changed man. Quite understandable, I suppose...'

'I've heard of him,' said Ace, surprising herself. 'Wasn't he one of the founders of the anti-nuclear movement in the 50s? We studied him in Modern History. He got into trouble for claiming the Government was testing a new secret weapon on British soil. They tried to have him locked away, said he was a crackpot. He disappeared in 1959.'

'Hard to believe it was forty years ago,' mused the Brigadier. 'He's stayed here ever since. Would you like to meet him?'

Ace was amazed. 'He's still alive? But he must be nearly 100 years old by now!'

Through all of this the Doctor had been quiet, watching and listening to his old associate. Now he stood up, as if having come to an important decision.

'Alistair, let's you and I go talk with Sir Terrance. Ace, I want you to find us some brandy and some coffee - black will do, I doubt you'll find any fresh milk in view of the circumstances.'

His tone brooked no argument so Ace bit her bottom lip, fighting back the urge to question his pronouncement. Instead she clambered behind the bar and went through into the kitchen, searching for a kettle.

The two men walked over to a staircase in the corner of the room and made their way up to the first floor of the hotel.

Outside, the first flakes of a fresh snowfall began to drift down from the black, cloudy sky.

'I should warn you, he's a crotchety old bugger,' said the Brigadier as they reached the top of the creaking stairs.

'That's alright,' smiled the Doctor. 'I've been a little crotchety in my times, too.' He reached into a side pocket and pulled out an antique fob watch. 'Have you ever been hypnotised, Brigadier?'

'Chap tried it on me once in Egypt but it didn't seem to have any effect. Quite put out, he was. Said I had an unusually stubborn mind.'

'Just as well. It's probably what's kept you going all this time,' murmured the Doctor, as much to himself as to his companion. They paused outside a heavy oak door. 'Shall we?'

Downstairs in the kitchen, Ace was having only limited success. The brandy had been easily found behind the bar, and a quick search of the cupboards soon turned up a battered kettle and a tea caddy with what appeared to be desiccated coffee beans inside.

'Well ancient,' announced Ace as she tried to turn the taps and fill the kettle with water. But both old fashioned faucets were immovable. Ace looked out the window and noticed the river outside. 'Exford, huh? So I guess that must be the River Exe. Hopefully, not too polluted.'

She stepped out the kitchen door and looked for a way down to the riverside, hoping to fill the kettle. Boil it for long enough, should kill any bugs in the river, she decided. Then she noticed the people on the streets.

Inside the upstairs bedroom, the Brigadier was perplexed. 'I don't understand where Sir Terrance can have gone, he's bed-bound.'

The Doctor was not interested in the empty four-poster. Instead he stared out the window as the scene below. More than a dozen villagers were walking around, carrying furniture and boxes, loading them into trucks.

'When did you first come to Exford, Brigadier?'

'1959, I was stationed here while on National Service.'

'The same year Sir Terrance disappeared. Did you meet him here?'

'Doctor, why are you asking me all these questions?'

The snow falling outside was getting heavier now but the villagers did not seem to notice. The Doctor turned away from the window to face the Brigadier, his watch held up before his eyes. It gentled swung from side to side, keeping time with the measured, precise rhythm of his words.

'Because something happened here 40 years ago. Something that changed this place. Something that changed your life and the life of Sir Terrance and everyone who called Exford home. It is time for you to remember what your unusually stubborn mind has forgotten.'

Ace stood quite still and watched the villagers. They seemed oblivious to her presence. Instead they busied themselves loading belongings into the back of several large army trucks which had pulled up at the roadside. Finally, one by one, they climbed into trucks and were driven away.

All the while, snow fell, building into drifts along the street. Ace suddenly realised how cold she had become. Her breath hung in the air as steam before her face and her teeth chattered together. She ran down to the riverside and scooped some water into the kettle before heading back to the White Hart.

An extra shiver ran down her spine as she reached the doorway. The snow falling now was different, but it took a second for her to identify why. Of course!

The snow was getting darker, turning from white to grey. A large flake settled on her hand. It was jet black. She better tell the Doctor and fast - something very strange was happening in Exford. Then she saw the monument on the village green.

'You came here 40 years ago - why?' The Doctor had pocketed his watch and was pacing the creaking floor of the hotel guestroom. One hand was rested against his jawline, index fingers tapping on his lips in time with the rhythm of his footfalls.

'I was on stationed here, part of a security detail for some top secret testing.' Lethbridge-Stewart spoke slowly, a sombre tone to his voice. He sat upright on a wooden chair by the empty bed, his face emotionless, his eyes glazed and empty. 'I was assigned to sentinel duty, maintaining the one-mile cordon around the village.'

'What was being tested?'

A new device, very hush-hush. We were never told the full details, it was all strictly need-to-know. I was just a guard.'

'But you must have heard whispers about it? Barracks talk?'

'Some of the men thought it was related to the atomic testing on Christmas Island. One soldier who worked in the officer's mess said he had heard talk about the weapon. It was a new device unlike anything ever tested before. Designed to strike terror into the hearts of the enemy.'

'But why test it here in England? In the 1950s the British used remote colonial islands for any dangerous experimentation,' the Doctor wondered aloud. He stopped to look out the window at the street below. The snowdrifts were changing, turning from white to black. Walking through them was the Doctor's companion.

Ace could not understand how she hadn't seen the stone obelisk when she and the Doctor had first walked into Exford. It stood on the edge of the village green, apart from the surrounding buildings. The darkening snow was piling around its base. Ace approached it with care. Too many strange things had happened here in the past hour, she decided. For once she would try not to rush into disaster.

Drawing closer, Ace could see lettering was carved into the stone. But the snowfall was becoming heavier and she had to brush the surface clear to make out the inscription.

'This monument honours the people of Exford, who sacrificed their homes and their village for the greater good - December, 1959,' Ace read the words aloud, her breath hanging in the air as vapour. 'So this place was evacuated forty years ago - that explains why it's all so empty. But why was it evacuated? What happened here?'

The old soldier dug into his pockets and pulled out the folded photograph, his fingers running back and forth across the creased edges. 'I was making a final sweep of the perimeter just prior to the weapon being tested when I saw someone running towards the village.'

'Sir Terrance.'

'I didn't know who he was then. I stopped the jeep and chased after him. Eventually found him on a hillside overlooking the village. He was sketching the scene, said he wanted to draw the village before we did our worst to it. I tried to pull him away, get him to safety but he said I just followed orders blindly. He accused me of being like the Nazis in the concentration camps.' Lethbridge-Stewart's eyes were brimming with liquid, a single tear running down his left cheek. 'I tried to pull him away, God knows I tried...' The tear paused on his jawline, before dropping onto the photograph in his hands.

The Doctor stared intently at the Brigadier. 'And then?'

Ace was about to walk away when she noticed another inscription below the first. But this one had been crudely scratched into the stone, as if by someone using their own fingernails. An impossible task, Ace thought to herself. Fingernails scratching on stone would take years, even decades to wear the stone away. Perhaps even forty years...

Ace wiped the black frosting of snow and ice away to read the words, a cold terror gripping her heart. 'Oh no, this can't be true. It can't!' she exclaimed. Ace started running back towards the White Hart at fast as her legs could travel across the icy road, shouting up towards the first floor.

'And then the final warning siren began...'

As Lethbridge-Stewart spoke, a klaxon whirred into life outside, its plaintive cry filling the air. Ace burst into the bedroom, breathlessly trying to gasp an explanation of what she had read on the monument.

'Doctor... that monument... it's not a monument... it's - it's a -'

'It's a bomb and it's about to go off,' the Doctor said, completing her sentence. 'At least, that's what the Brigadier thinks.' He gestured sadly at his old friend, who was curled up on the floor, hands over his eyes.

'Don't look, for god's sake, don't look!' Lethbridge-Stewart cried out, his voice sounding frail and high-pitched. In the distance there was a brief crump, like the sound of distant mortar fire, then the room was engulfed in white light. The old man on the floor started screaming.

Ace opened her eyes again. For a moment, the Brigadier's terror had convinced her that something horrible was going to happen, despite the Doctor's apparent calm. She had clenched her eyes shut but now opened them to find the room quite changed.

Lethbridge-Stewart was still curled up on the floor, but now the old man Ace knew was a young soldier in uniform. The Doctor was beside her, a puzzled look on his face. He was regarding the man occupying the bed with the curiosity of an intrigued cat.

The new arrival in the bed was probably the oldest man Ace had ever seen. She remembered once being taken to visit her grandfather in a hospital while still a little girl. Her abiding memory from then was of the clinging smell of disinfectant and a talking skull with skin like paper stretched over the gaps. Her grandfather had been in good shape compared to this old guy, Ace thought. He was well crumbly.

'Sir Terrance Adams, I presume,' the Doctor said quietly. 'I'm the Doctor and this is -'

'Ace, yes I know who you are, young man,' Sir Terrance replied.

'The Brigadier said you might be crotchety.'

'You would be too after forty years stuck in this place.' The bedridden figure regarded the cowering Lethbridge-Stewart. 'Must say, I never thought he'd make Brigadier. Captain seemed more likely when I first met him. It's amazing what putting a little steel into someone's will can do.'

Ace glanced out the window. The street was quite empty, not a sign of the near blizzard conditions that had existed just a few minutes before. 'Doctor - the snow - it's gone!'

'Yes, sorry about that,' Sir Terrance said blandly. 'I can only control so many elements at once and keeping them all going is too much for me these days. Guilt is a powerful energy source but even guilt has its limits.'

'Interesting, very interesting,' murmured the Doctor, a faint Scots burr audible as he rolled the words out of his mouth. 'Why?'

'Why what?'

'Why this man, why this place, why this?' the Doctor demanded, anger rising in his voice. 'Why?'

Ace sensed a battle of wills unfolding. She had spent enough time travelling with the Doctor to realise this was out of her league. Give me an enemy you can fight with a can of Nitro-9, she thought, not mindgame trickery like the Doctor specialised in. Talking a foe to death just gave her a headache. She knelt by the balled up figure of Lethbridge-Stewart and tried to sooth his sobbing.

'It was his fault,' Sir Terrance said, turning away.

'Hardly! Look at him - a young man, only just able to shave. You know as well as I do that he had nothing to do with what happened in this village, what happened to you,' the Doctor insisted.

Sir Terrance smiled triumphantly, the change splitting his face sideways like some grotesque grinning death's head. 'We're not in the village any more, we're in my domain now - see for yourself!'

The Doctor looked out the window. Beyond was nothing. No street, no cottages, nothing but an empty landscape stretching to an empty horizon where it met an empty sky. 'Where are we?' he asked bleakly.

That would be telling,' Sir Terrance teased.

'But you're dying to tell us, aren't you?' The Doctor spat the words out, his voice contemptuous. 'Dying to show how us how creative you are, how you've sculpted this reality, how you've drawn us into it, how you've responsible for turning a brave old soldier into a piteable wreck, a broken man.'

'Say pretty please.'

'What?'

'Say pretty please and I'll tell you.'

Ace looked up at the Doctor imploringly. 'Don't! Don't give him the satisfaction!'

'I have to Ace, if it's the only way.' He turned his attention back to the mocking ghoul in the bed.

'Pretty please.'

'Well, since you asked so nicely...'

Ace blinked and found herself floating in the air, looking down at her own body. She had experienced the sensation a few times before in dreams and at moments of rest, as if her self was sliding out of the physical shell containing her spirit. Panic gripped her, until a familiar soothing voice whispered in her ear.

'Don't worry Ace, it's just astral projection,' the Doctor said. 'Relax and enjoy the trip.' He was hovering beside her, the bedroom splayed out below. Opposite them floated the skeletal frame of Sir Terrance, a nightshirt hanging from his body like a shroud. The scene beneath them blurred and changed, becoming a military briefing room. A scientist was addressing a gathering of senior soldiers.

'When an atomic device explodes, it causes an electromagnetic pulse that disables machinery in the surrounding area. The device we are testing at Exford attempts to replicate the effect but makes the human senses the target. If successful, it deranges an enemy population, rendering them entirely susceptible to invasion.'

'That's barbaric,' Ace said, almost to herself.

'Quite,' the Doctor sighed. 'I feared it was something like this.'

Below them one of the generals attending the briefing was speaking. 'How will you know the device has been a success? Bad enough you're testing it on British soil, surely you can't test it on British citizens?'

'Of course not,' the scientist replied smoothly. 'We will be using livestock and primates to monitor the success of the device. The test site will be evacuated and cordoned off. All residents will be moved to new lodgings, until the area can be declared safe again.'

The general wasn't giving up that easily. 'Why test it in a village - surely we have ample test sites that aren't currently populated?'

'That's the exact reason - we need to test it in real conditions, to see what effect it has on a real domestic site.'

The scene began blurring again, giving the Doctor time to throw a question at their glowering guide. 'How do we know what you're showing us is true? How do you know about this?'

'This is my interpretation of events, gleaned from facts I've gathered over the years. Lethbridge-Stewart can be quite the detective when properly guided, and his role with UNIT gave him access to all manner of classified information. Ahh! It's the big day...'

Now the trio were hovering above the hillside overlooking Exford. Beneath them a much younger Sir Terrance was running towards the village, pursued by Lethbridge- Stewart. They clashed and were interrupted by the klaxon wail. Lethbridge-Stewart threw himself to the ground, facing away from village but the artist kept watch, sketching to the last.

'I want you to watch carefully, this is the moment the physicians and doctors all missed at the time,' the floating Sir Terrance announced.

There was a brief crump like the sound of distant mortar fire and a white light flashed outwards from the monument on the Exford village green. The young Sir Terrance began screaming as the light engulfed him, burning away his clothes, his flesh, his bones. As the light past him, he fell backwards - into the curled up figure of Lethbridge-Stewart. Then the light was gone, leaving the young soldier laying on the ground, screaming over and over, his back burnt to the bone.

The scream finally faded away as the scene below reverted to the bedroom of the White Hart. 'They never found a trace of my body. Lethbridge-Stewart spent more than a year in military hospitals recovering from his injuries. After a few months he stopped trying to convince the doctors and psychiatrists there had been someone else there - they all refused to believe him. Better for his career if he shut up about me. Better not to mention the little voice at the back of his mind.'

Ace blinked and was back in her own body, crouched over the supine Lethbridge-Stewart. He was restored to his elder self, but still curled up on the floor. At least his whimpering had stopped.

'So you've been haunting his psyche for forty years, clinging on to life by taking away a little piece of his, leaching away his peace of mind,' the Doctor said accusingly.

'He owed me that much!' protested Sir Terrance from his bed.

'He owed you nothing!' shouted Ace as he stood up. 'He tried to save you from your own stupidity and you've been blaming him for it ever since!'

'Ace...' the Doctor said, a warning tone in his voice, but she was having none of it.

'I've met some creeps in my time but you're one of the worst. I studied you in school, I know you saw some terrible things when you went into the concentration camps as the Second World War ended. But you tried to do some good by starting the antinuclear campaign. How have you ended up so bitter and twisted? How?' Ace demanded.

'I was angry!' Sir Terrance shouted back at her. 'You don't know what it's like, trapped in the dark recesses at the back of someone's mind, only able to come out when they're asleep. I have lived in the shadows, on the edge of a life for four decades. My own personal prison, a cage of flesh and blood and bones called Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart.'

'Then let go,' the Doctor suggested, his voice calm and full of reason. 'Stop clinging on, let go of this life, let my friend have his own life back for himself, what little he has left of it. Let go.'

Sir Terrance just stared at him. 'But I'm afraid. If you've seen the things that I've seen, the horrors, the atrocities...'

'I know. The evil that men do haunts them long afterwards, the evil that men see even longer. But it's time to forget the past.'

'I'm so tired,' Sir Terrance whispered. 'I would rest, but my dreams always turned into nightmares. I'd like to rest in peace.'

'Then let go of this life. Let go...'

Lethbridge-Stewart stirred on the floor. Ace bent down to examine him. 'He's coming round, Doctor.' She noticed the bed was empty now, no sign of the twisted, gnarled figure that had occupied it.

Together Ace and the Doctor got the Brigadier on to his feet and helped him downstairs, back into the warmth of the bar. Ace fetched him the forgotten glass of brandy and he sipped at it appreciatively.

'What happened? I seemed to have dozed off,' Lethbridge-Stewart said apologetically. 'Did you meet Sir Terrance?'

Ace grimaced but took care the old soldier did not see it. 'Yeah, we met him alright.'

'He's going away,' the Doctor added. 'Said he'd had enough of Exford and wanted to go somewhere more restful...'

'Understandable, I suppose. Chap's been through a lot these last forty years or so.'

'Well, that's all over now,' the Doctor smiled.

The two time travellers stayed with the Brigadier for several hours to make sure he had recovered from his ordeal. Finally, they waved him off as he drove away in the Landrover, after announcing he had to get back to Doris before she called out the police to find him.

'Professor, why didn't we get a lift off him? It would have saved up having to hike back up this hill to the TARDIS,' Ace asked as they set off.

'The Brigadier could do with being alone for a while. I think he's had enough company, don't you?'

'Yeah, I guess so. Imagine sharing your mind with someone else for all those years and not even realising it.'

'The human mind is a very resilient entity, Ace, and the military mind is particularly stubborn. That's probably what save the Brigadier from going insane long ago.'

'What about that little girl? The monument that was really a bomb? I suppose you're going to tell me they were just mental projections from inside the Brig's psyche, traps and tricks from Sir Terrance?'

The Doctor stopped and smiled. 'Ahh, now that would be telling.'

Ace punched him on the arm, slightly harder than she intended. 'Don't you start! I've had more than enough mystery for one day.'

The pair linked arms and stomped up the hill towards the TARDIS, away from Exford. Behind them, the first few flakes of a gentle white snow began to fall on the forgotten village.

Safe in the Knowledge
By
Mark Phippen

This is suburbia. Rows of identical houses line the streets, the occasional splash of colour from a well-kept garden the only break in uniformity. The sound of a football match fills the air, interrupted only by the heavy bass pumping from the speakers of a passing car. People hurry by, struggling with umbrellas, children in wellingtons in tow. Others huddle under the protection of the canopy over the front of the local shop, waiting for the shower to pass. Ordinary. Except for the little man, with the question mark umbrella.

It is raining heavily, but the Doctor seems to care not a bit. He is whistling a merry tune, some chirpy little pop song that has wormed its way into his head due to his companion's constant playing of it over the TARDIS's sound system, and he walks along the street, twirling his umbrella like Charlie Chaplin. He hasn't even put it up.

He turns into a park, taking a moment to swing on the railings across the entrance - the ones they put up to stop children from cycling through it. It never works. The park is just a small patch of grass really, with a children's play area and a rather sorry looking flowerbed. The trodden down grass has become muddy in the rain, so the Doctor keeps to the slabbed pathway that cuts through the park.

Hopping from leg to leg, he bounds from one slab to the next in a haphazard, zigzag fashion, holding onto his hat as he gathers up speed, and stops only to avoid a collision with a tired looking woman pushing a pushchair.

The woman gives him an odd look, so the Doctor raises his hat.

'I'm trying not to step on the cracks in the pavement,' he explains.

'My daughter does that, but then she's only three,' replies the woman, 'What's your excuse?'

'Second childhood?' suggests the Doctor. 'Very common in middle age, I'm told.'

'Probably.' She says, smiling for the first time. 'Or maybe you just like to have fun. It's nice to have that freedom once in a while.' Her smile fades. 'Well, I'd better get home before this frozen stuff melts,' she says, indicating the Hypervalue carrier bags draped over the handles of the pushchair, 'or else the old man will kill me.'

The Doctor winces.

'What's the matter?' asks the woman.

'Don't go home. Not today.' The Doctor stares her right in the eyes now; his gaze transfixes her, hypnotic.

'What are you talking about? I've got to. I've got mouths to feed, and Harry is waiting for his dinner.' There's a six pack of lager sticking out of the top of a carrier bag.

'Have you got anywhere else to go, a relative, friend?'

'Well, there's my sister. She lives in Barston though, that's a bus ride away and I haven't got any money. All this stuff's on credit as it is.'

The Doctor fishes around in his pockets, turning out several items of a size the woman thinks are too big to all fit inside that little brown coat: a yo-yo, a cricket ball, a melted chocolate bar (and a half-eaten apple that goes straight into a nearby bin.) Eventually, and with an 'aha!' the Doctor pulls out a small bag, tied at the top with a piece of string. He hands the bag to the woman.

'There, that should be enough to cover it. Just make sure you take out the Jarkan currency. The coins make very nice pets, but I'm not sure the City Metropolitan Bus Co. take them yet.'

'But....'

'But nothing.'

Something in those eyes tells the woman she should do as he says.

The Doctor stands and watches her walk towards the bus stop. The rain is easing now, but continues to drip from the rim of his hat. He pays it no attention, focused as he is on the woman and her pushchair.

It seems like an age, but eventually a red double decker bus pulls up at the stop, its destination reading 'Barston'. With a final glance back at the Doctor, the woman gathers her child in her arms, picks up the folded pushchair and steps aboard.

Still the Doctor stands there. He watches as the woman buys her ticket, puts the pushchair in the holder at the front of the bus, and moves down the aisle to find a seat, stumbling a little as the driver thoughtlessly pulls off. He watches as the bus pulls away, and continues to watch until it is out of his sight.

He is about to turn and walk away when another bus pulls up at the stop.

'Barston.' the notice reads. 'Typical.' the Doctor says.

And with that, he turns and walks away, pulling from his pocket a copy of the next day's local newspaper. He turns to page five. No longer does it report the death of a young mother from a violent blow to the stomach administered by her husband in a drunken rage. No longer does it report that the father hanged himself upon sobering up and discovering what he had done. No longer does it report that little Susie Trent had lost both her parents in a night of violence.

Smiling, the Doctor throws the paper into the bin, and looks around him. At the children playing, the parents gossiping, the people walking their dogs. The ordinary people of Earth who have their own horrors to face. Horrors every bit as terrifying as Daleks, Sontarans and Cybermen. He can never hope to combat all of those horrors, but he does what he can.

Swinging again on the bars, the Doctor leaves the park and continues his journey, enjoying the sun that creeps through the parting rainclouds. Enjoying his favourite planet, safe in the knowledge that there will always be a bit of his hearts devoted to it.

Adjudicator's Holiday

By

Kathryn Sullivan

The marketplace was abuzz with activity. Chris Cwej strolled down the wide passageways between colourfully festooned booths. His Adjudicator armour earned him sharp glances from some of the offplanet tourists, but he tended to disregard them. The Doctor had said this planet was outside of the Empire's borders and laws, but Chris had decided to wear the armour anyway - he felt he fitted in better with it on, especially since the natives had armour themselves. The only trouble was that the armourless native children apparently were fascinated; he seemed to have a small parade following him or sidling up to touch with antenna tip or feeler.

The crablike natives bartered ceaselessly around him. Among themselves the language was a mixture of claw clicks and antenna waving, but for offplanet tourists the breathing mouth could vocalise.

'Souvenirs! Fragments of the cast-off shell of our glorious leader! Moulted only last month!'

'Replicas of the Low Hall! Only twenty left!'

'Fried maggots! Break your night fast with the finest grubs!'

There was a series of giggles behind him as he paused, then turned swiftly. Two of the tiniest hatchlings squealed and dived for cover, but the rest of the parade stood and giggled at him. The smallest one in front chewed thoughtfully on a feeler. 'Pretty,' it murmured through the breathing mouth.

'It's the colour,' the nearby booth owner commented. 'Don't see that shade of blue too often. Most of the clans around here go in for greens and bright orange.' Its antennae waved pensively. 'What do you eat to get that colour in your shell?'

'Right, what's all this then?'

Chris turned at the standard Adjudicator phrase. The being facing him was not from the Corps, though. A badge was welded onto its shell, and bright yellow paint striped the rest of the green and brown mottled shell in a design he hadn't seen on any of the other natives of Klatak.

Chris beamed at a fellow officer, but the being's attention wasn't on him. The rest of the conversation was feeler/waved and claw/clicked, but somehow Chris could understand it. 'Here now, don't harass the tourists. You know they can't help being shell-less.'

One of the larger hatchlings snorted through its breathing mouth and attempted to clack its small pincer. 'But it's not shell-less, it's... an adult!'

One dark eye swivelled backwards to regard Chris, who contented himself with a friendly wave. Two other eyes studied the parade. 'Are they bothering you, sir?'

'Me?' Chris turned back toward the hatchlings, and discovered that they had evaporated into the crowd. There was a familiar small antenna around the corner of one booth, and a short pincer visible behind a large, garishly attired multi-tentacled tourist, but that was all. Even the friendly booth owner had lost interest. Chris mentally sighed. Typical crowd response. Apparently the officer thought so as well; the two eyes that had been watching the hatchlings were now studying a flitter circling overhead.

'So, you patrol a regular beat?' Another eye quickly swivelled toward him, and Chris realised the question could be regarded in a suspicious as well as friendly manner. 'Uh, I'm in law enforcement myself.'

The being gurgled in amusement. 'I thought there was something familiar about your bearing. What brings you to my turf? Are you on the trail?'

'Just relaxation - I think. I never know for sure lately.' Adjudicator training inspired him to add, 'Why? You think something is going down?'

Antennae whipped past his nose. 'I can't put my claw on exactly what, but yes, there is a taste of something in the atmosphere.'

Chris grinned and restrained himself from draping an arm over the being's carapace. 'Well, why don't you continue your patrol and we'll talk about it?'

The Klatakan's posture suddenly tensed. 'Never mind, it's going down now. If you'll excuse me- -' It scurried off sideways, one feeler tapping a bulky band around another as it moved. 'Hibisus to base. Backup needed. Disturbance at royal jeweller's tent.'

Chris looked after the being and saw a flitter landing a short distance away. Reaching automatically for a weapon that was back in the TARDIS, he followed.

Although Chris had the advantage of longer legs, the Klatakan had more of them and knew the marketplace. After pushing his way through the crowd heading in the other direction, Chris finally caught up with the officer behind a booth with a clear view of the landed flitter and the front of what Chris assumed to be the royal jeweller's tent. 'So, what's the plan?'

Only one eye of the three that were studying the scene swivelled back to regard him. 'The plan is to observe and wait for backup. The plan for you, on the other claw -'

Chris raised his empty hands. 'Hey, you need backup, I'm here. That's a Pezian at the flitter controls - it's a long way from the Empire.'

'You know that offworlder?'

'Not that particular one, no. Pezians have four arms, two legs and a tail that can double as a club, so watch out for that. Short-sighted, irritable and greedy - it must be expecting a big haul to come out this way. Lots of valuables inside the tent?'

'Jewels that were deemed below standard for the Leader - and its standards are high this season - so yes, there are considerable. But why does the thief remain outside?'

'Pezians are clumsy - bad hand-eye co-ordination. With jewels, that one would have partners inside bagging rather than risk damaging the loot. We should move closer.'

'That Pezian has blasters in three of its hands.'

'Pezians are short-sighted. We'd practically have to be next to the flitter before it would see us.'

Antennae crossed and flicked. 'Ah, visual deterrent. And my people would be none the wiser. Very well.' And it scurried sideways to the next booth, all the while pointing a stubby rod at the flitter with one feeler.

Chris followed, wishing he could crouch as low as the Klatakan.

Their new post had a better view of the tent flap. 'How many do you think are inside?'

'If the thieves are my people, three at most. More could not fit inside the tent - allowing for the jeweller and one or two customers - and less would mean trips to load the flitter while one guards the hostages.'

As if on cue, an orange-shelled Klatakan, five large bulging sacks draped across its carapace, emerged from the tent and headed for the flitter. The flitter door opened while the Pezian stayed at the controls. The Klatakan quickly shoved its bundles into the open door and then scurried back towards the tent.

'Ah,' said Hibisus, 'two, then.' It tapped one antenna against its largest claw while eyes swivelled to study the rest of the marketplace. 'You, ah - '

'Chris,' he supplied.

Antennae flicked and crossed. 'Chris. You stay here until you see me pass the edge of the tent. Then you move to the tent flap and I will block their way to the flitter. We will stop them leaving with any more 'loot'.'

'The Pezian can escape in the flitter.'

'The air law will handle the flitter.'

Hibisus scurried around the corner of the booth. Chris shook his head. He waited as the officer reached the tent flap and carefully edged past it.

Pausing only to snatch up a loose metal tent peg as long as his arm, Chris headed for the jeweller's tent.

He reached the flap just as two heavily laden Klatakans - one orange, one brown - emerged, their attention on the beings inside the tent. He rapped the blaster out of the brown-shell's claw with the tent peg and waved the metal rod threateningly at the orange-shell when it started forward toward him with snapping claws. 'Going somewhere?'

'Yes,' interrupted another. 'With me.'

Chris turned slowly to find the Pezian standing in the flitter doorway, holding blasters on both the Klatakan officer and himself. Glasses glinted in front of the Pezian's eyes, and Chris carefully let the tent peg drop and raised his hands. Who would have thought Pezians would have discovered corrective lens?

The Klatakans scurried toward the flitter with their bags, and the blaster pointed at Chris gestured. 'You! Get in the flitter!'

'Are you crazy?' the orange shell protested. 'We've already got the stripes!'

'Yeah, but I know Adjudicators. With him hostage, we're guaranteed his partner will be on his best behaviour to get him back. We'll be protected from both the local and the interplanetary cops.'

Chris refrained from correcting it about Roz's probable behaviour. There might be enough of the being left for a funeral, but not much.

The Pezian waved the blaster pointed at his fellow officer. Pincers raised, Hibisus scrambled into the flitter while Chris tried to plan. The blaster aimed at him centred on the middle of his chest, where his armour would protect him. But he didn't know enough about the thickness of Klatakan armour. If Chris resisted and the Pezian fired at Hibisus as well - His thoughts were interrupted when the Pezian snarled, 'Inside, Adjudicator!'

Attempting his best mollifying grin, he entered the flitter.

The faint seaweedy aroma of the marketplace was stronger within. Chris followed Hibisus past the piled sacks of jewels to the far wall of the flitter. The brown-shell's claw clicks snickered.

'Gimme your binders, stripey,' it ordered.

Hibisus' feelers reached inside its lower shell and tossed shell-studded lengths of chain onto the floor. 'Air law won't care that you hold us hostage.'

'Oh, I think the Adjudicator's partner will make air law see reason,' the Pezian disagreed. It handed a blaster to orange-shell. 'Chain them to the wall and then help me with our demands.' It vanished through the control room door.

The flitter shuddered as it lifted off. The brown shelled Klatakan finished wrapping one long chain about both of Hibisus' large pincers several times. It slapped the other end of the chain against the wall, and Chris was surprised to see it cling.

The orange-shell raised its blaster as Hibisus attempted to move.

'Nu-uh, let them dry, stripy.'

The brown-shell brought another length of chain to Chris. Its eyes looked up and down the human, antenna curling in puzzlement.

'Cuff a leg,' the orange-shell advised.

'But what about those top feelers?'

'Oh, I can s -' An antenna rapped against Chris' head before he could finish, and he looked at Hibisus, wondering why it had hit him.

'Can you reach that high?' the orange-shell argued as if Chris had not spoken.

Chris didn't understand why Hibisus didn't want him to volunteer the information that he could sit, and why it was signalling him to keep his hands raised, but he closed his mouth and went along.

'Besides, they don't look too strong,' the orange-shell continued. It watched as the brown shell wrapped a chain about Chris' leg and stuck the chain against the wall, then both Klatakans headed for the control room, the brown-shell patting the nearest sack of jewels as they left.

Chris watched to make sure they were both out of sight, then dropped to one knee to examine the chain wrapped about his lower right leg. The shells studding the chain were stuck tightly to his armour and the wall.

'Try twisting,' Hibisus ordered, already struggling with its chain. 'There's still a chance, if the bond hasn't set yet.'

'What are they?' Chris tried to pull his chain off the wall, but the shells resisted as if they had been welded there.

'The best binders ever developed - ' Hibisus backed to the length of its chain and tugged 'nuh - guaranteed to hold even a rabid Nuarbnoillizab.'

Chris looked again at the chain. The shells were tight against his armour, but the chain itself was a little loose, maybe just enough. He cracked the seam of his leg armour.

'Eeiii!' Chris looked up to see Hibisus staring horrified at him, one eye looking at his face, another at his leg. 'You... your shell... isn't that painful?'

'No, my armour's detachable.' Chris slowly eased his leg out of the armour and chain.

Antennae flicked and crossed. 'Felons have been known to self-amputate a limb; I'm glad you're not doing that. I'm stuck here until my next moult, it seems. At least base will get a laugh at me.'

Chris padded over to look at Hibisus' bonds. 'Can you contact your base? Let them know what's going on?' He added his weight to Hibisus' tugs.

Hibisus tapped its communicator band. 'Not that it will help. Once we lifted off, we moved from land law to air law. Will your partner do as they say?'

'My partner's more liable to rip their claws off and beat them senseless with their own pincers.' Two of the shells popped free, and Chris took another grip on the chain. Just as he braced himself, he heard the tick-tick of approaching claw feet. He hurriedly dropped the chain and went to stand by his discarded leg armour.

The brown shell entered the hold with only the slightest of glances at the hostages. Its antennae flicked out to touch and smooth every sack within reach, its breathing mouth working as if it was counting. Its feelers and pincers were so much in motion that it took Chris a moment to realise that the being was unarmed.

'You missed one,' Hibisus said. 'It fell over here.'

'What? Where?'

Chris turned to look at Hibisus as the brown shell scrambled around the pile of sacks toward them. The officer's antenna rapped against his leg armor and up to touch a spot on the being's undershell under its mouths.

'Yeah, it's over here,' Chris agreed. 'Here, I'll get it for you.' Crouching, he gripped his discarded armour and waited until the brown-shell was in range, then snapped around and upwards and slammed the armour into its undershell.

The brown shell was flipped onto its back. Legs flailing weakly in the air, it slid slowly across the floor and bumped into the stack of loot.

The Pezian suddenly appeared in the doorway, blasters in two of its hands, and Chris dropped behind the pile of sacks. He edged about the pile as the Pezian advanced toward Hibisus.

'Where is the Adjudicator?'

The officer clacked its pincers. 'Ask your friend.'

The Pezian looked down and kicked the brown shell. 'What are you doing? Where -'

The flitter shuddered as if hit, and Chris sprang up and swung the only weapon near to hand - a sack of jewels. The sack caught the Pezian across the face, and it staggered back, dropping one blaster. The other blaster came up in Chris' direction and Chris threw another sack. This one the thief caught, however. Glasses askew, the Pezian transferred the blaster to its right upper hand to keep both Hibisus and Chris under cover. 'That's enough of that.' The being deliberately dropped the sack.

The sack's contents spilled out onto the floor, and the Pezian stared at them in horror. 'Where are the jewels? These are... eggs!'

'The finest royal eggs available,' the little brown Klatakan agreed as it attempted to right itself. 'The jewels of the Leader.'

'Eggs?' Chris asked. 'Your leader sells its eggs?'

Hibisus raised two feelers. 'The best way of bringing money into the treasury.

Without royal nourishment, the hatchlings will never be a threat to the Line, but the genes are sound. Some of the clans will improve their own lines by the interbreeding; others take the hatchlings as servants.' As the Pezian turned to stare at the pile of stacks, Hibisus pulled another feeler with a familiar shape from hiding and Chris nodded at the officer. 'And for those so inclined the eggs can be - ' pincers clattered and the eating mouth snapped - 'food.'

The brown-shell snickered. 'They're delicious.'

The Pezian shrieked and aimed its remaining blaster at the being's exposed undershell. Chris lunged at the blaster arm and pinned it against the wall. He wrenched the blaster from the being's grasp and turned to find Hibisus covering the thieves with the blaster the Pezian had dropped.

'Got them?'

'One moment.' Hibisus took aim and blasted the chain holding itself to the wall. Chris took the hint and used his blaster to separate the chain linking the large pincers.

The flitter shuddered again. 'Air law seems to have finally located us,' Hibisus commented.

'Eggs,' the Pezian repeated as Chris passed. The brown shell merely giggled as it rocked back and forth, legs waving in the air.

Chris cautiously entered the control area, but he quickly realised that the orange- shell had other concerns. Three striped flitters were visible through the ports ahead and alongside and Chris was confident that other flitters hovered behind the craft. The flitters projected what seemed to be a net of yellow force beams enclosing the thieves' vessel.

Chris quickly scooped up a blaster left unattended atop a console.

'...surrender immediately,' said a distant voice.

The orange shell snapped a pincer at the forward port. 'Release us now or we'll kill the hostages!'

Chris rapped on its carapace with the blaster. 'I don't think so.' He spoke loudly, trying to locate the comspeaker. 'This is Adjudicator Cwej. Officer Hibisus and I have regained control of the flitter.' He surveyed the controls with an eager grin. 'Where would you like me to land this?'

Chris tugged uselessly at the chain still wrapped about his empty leg armour. Roz would definitely have something to say about this, and it would not be complimentary. Unless he could convince her it was a new form of decoration.

Behind him, Hibisus argued with air law officers as to who had custody of the prisoners now standing outside under guard.

Meanwhile the brightly decorated royal jeweller scurried back and forth, returning one sack at a time to its tent.

Someone crouched beside him. 'How interesting. Barnacles?'

'Hello, Doctor.'

The small man patted the pockets of his white jacket. 'I had wondered what was stuck all over that officer's pincers.' He patted all his pockets twice, finally producing a small spray bottle. 'Hold your breath.' He misted the stuck shells, and within seconds they slid off the armour.

'Thanks!' Chris snapped the armour back on and stood up, feeling fully in uniform again

The Klatakan legal discussion broke up, and Hibisus turned toward Chris. 'So,' the officer commented, 'ready to resume my patrol?'

'I'm afraid we must leave,' the Doctor said.

'But hold out your pincers first,[1] Chris said. He misted the remains of the binders. 'This way you don't have to wait until your next moult.'

Hibisus shook its pincers, breathing mouth working soundlessly as the binders dropped off. It ran an antenna along where the shells had been. 'Thank you. You've saved me from snickers at base.'

Chris looked to where Roz waited at the edge of the marketplace. 'Believe me, I quite understand.'

Past Time Catching
Dave Stone

Prologue

In the interdimensionally complex spaces within the TARDIS, in a Sanctum Chamber that existed, in some abstruse manner, in the centre of universal chaos in much the same way as the eye exists in the middle of a hurricane, the Doctor pored through a certain magazine. Ordinarily, he thought, he prided himself on the Catholicism of his reading tastes, but there were limits. There was such a thing as taking the broad church of sensibility too far.

The magazine was cheap and garish, the cover depicting a rather over endowed young woman in what was probably intended to be a space suit, clutching an extremely dubious item that might or might not have been a bolt-blaster gun, and with the similarly suspicious-looking elongated and somewhat bulbous mass of a starship in the background.

Occasionally, as he read, the Doctor raised his eyebrows. Then he frowned. Then he scowled.

'Oh dear me, ' he said, in his faintly Scottish brogue. 'Oh dear, oh dear, oh me. Now I'm all for living and let live, but something really has to be

done. The time has come for action, I think. '

With that, he flung the periodical aside and stormed from the Sanctum, his manner reminiscent of some mother bearing down upon a schoolyard bully who has stolen the dinner money of her child. Presently, through the Sanctum door, there could be heard the sounds of dematerialisation. A faint, convective breeze ran through the chamber, stirring the pages of the magazine.

And if eyes had been there to see and read those pages, they would have seen the words upon them begin to change...

Astonishing Stories of Unmitigated Science!
The Giant-sized Monthly for the Fan of the Future who Knows what He Likes **From the Editor's *Astonishing!* Desk...**

Greetings and welcome to the latest thrilling issue of *Astonishing Stories of Unmitigated Science!* We here at *Astonishing!* have worked real hard to put this month's issue together; the Linotype is set and ready for the presses and all systems are 'green for go', even despite the sad news that our most gracious publisher of many years, Goblinslather Press, has declared bankruptcy following the disappearance of its honoured founder, Arlo Goblinslather, in a tragic ornithopter accident over the Malagasi South Seas. Our new proprietors, Wamco Holding Properties Inc. (Korea), share our God-given dream of bringing quality SF to those who are not only fans but are also discerners, but have told us that we have to cut our costs by way of a drastic trimming of our page-count, word rates and permanent editorial staff. There was some consternation about that in the *Astonishing!* bullpen, I can tell you! But our little family rallied together and we are proud to present a collection of tip-top yarns by all-new writers which continue in the finest *Astonishing!* tradition of E. Dan Belsen, Charles 'Bubba' Delancey and Podmore Sloathe! None of whom, unfortunately, appear in this issue for contractual reasons.

So let the so-called critics in their decadent ivory towers gnash their reefer-stained teeth at the so-called 'pulps' for all they like! For all their lit'ry talk of the transcendence of content over form, the telling particular and of litotes, they are nothing but denouncers who will never understand how a monthly like *Astonishing!* can do its tales done in the Scientific Method that only the cleverest and most technically educated geniuses can truly do. They sit there with their fountain pens and little gilded pocketbooks, drinking their prissy little cups of tea and Absinthe, getting their so-called 'ideas' from the funny papers and this World Wide Internet of theirs, and I'll bet they couldn't work a basic piece of engineering equipment like a slide rule if their worthless lives depended on it.

Fear not though, readers, *Astonishing Stories of Unmitigated Science!* will be around, now and for ever, to show them the error of their ways! The Manifest Destiny of Mankind (and Womankind, too!) awaits! On with the chronicles of our glorious and indomitable Future!!

- 'Jolly' John F. McMacraken, Editor-in-Chief

Snail Women from Uranus

by Norbert Edgar Trant

[Hideous galactic aliens are come to defile our fairer human sex, and nothing within the power of mortal Man to stop them! How this horrifying and seemingly insoluble problem is solved can only come from a plot-twist so devilishly original and ingenious, that only a mind such as that of Norbert Edgar Trant *could have ever possibly thought it up. The prolific Mr Trant has sent us, without fail, a new and meticulously hand-written manuscript from his home in Westlake Falls, Virginia, for every month since our first ever publication, and which we have always looked forward to and read with lively interest This is his first appearance in the pages* of Astonishing! *itself]*

The stars were bright that night, whole constellations and the galaxies in them shining in the pitch-black sky and laying there like scattered jewels on velvet, shining down on the sleepy little town of Kitchen Falls, set deep in the majestic forests of Kitchen Falls. Still and quiet, the stars were fixed for all eternity - but something else moved through the sky, slashing across it and leaving a fiery screaming trail in its very vacuum itself. *This* was no brightly boiling furnace of the nebulas... it was a space ship! An alien space ship... and who knew what crawling, slithering terror and horror those alien monsters who were in it would bring...

Norman Manley wasn't thinking about aliens, for all he had just been to see a movie about them at the Kitchen Falls drive-in. The movie had been *Snail Women from Uranus,* starring Candy Crawford and Lara Dane, and the thrusting womanly globes thus on so blatant display had made him feel real frisky. You could see through their tops and everything. This had given Norman some Ideas, so he had tried to touch the pliant orbs of the girl he was with, but she had slapped him hard and raked his face with her nails until it started to bleed. She really *had* wanted Norman to touch her, the girl, whose name was Bernice Summerfield, had then explained, but she was an old fashioned girl with lots of primitive sex-hang-ups, and she could not be doing with anything like that until she was respectably married.

Well, Norman had plenty of other girls whose minds had not been canalised with illogical and outmoded sex-ideas that had no place in the New World Order of the Atomic Age, so now he was driving his bright red 'hot rod' automobile into nearby Stovetown to meet one of them. Her name was Dorothee McShane, and she was a stripper in a bar called the Beer Cellar, which she did because, apart from the money, she really *liked* to do it and it made her feel real hot. She was a real 'swinging' lady, and once they had even done sex right there on the stage, after the bar had closed and the lights had gone out.

That was why the existence of aliens - though as a 'switched on' kid who listened to the radio news, he knew it was impossible that they *not* exist - was the last thing on Norman Manley's mind... until he turned a corner in the narrow country road, and

something landed in the woods off to one side in an explosion of fire and with a devastating *Crash!.* Instantly, Norman made his 'hot rod' squeal to a stop, dived through the door and started running through the woods as fast as his well-muscled athlete's legs and firm young buttocks could carry him.

'It must be a crashed jet plane out of Table City Air Base!' he thought to himself grimly, and vowed to retrieve the unfortunate pilot, if the pilot had survived, even at the cost of his own life! The giving of his own, he thought, to save one of those brave boys who even now stood as the final bastion between all that was decent and good and the Godless foreign hoards, would be a life well spent indeed.

What he found, however, was something different. Instead of the crashed and mangled remains of an aeroplane, a shining ovoid squatted in the burning scrub and maples, resting on tripodular support struts. Norman was no fool. He recognised this thing for what it was instantly. 'Aliens!' he snarled. 'What hideous deeds can they be up to here?'

And it was then that a hatch opened in the side of the ovoid with a hiss of noxious alien gasses. And something came out of it... something so monstrous and horrible that to even begin to describe its monstrous and horrific form would drive you mad with suppurating horror of it! And Norman Manley clawed at his eyes and screamed as if his lungs would burst...

The next day, Bernice Summerfield was behind the soda pop stand in the drug store that she worked in, when Norman walked into it in his best suit of clothes, with a marriage license and a gold ring with a diamond as big as a tree snipe egg and must have cost every cent of a year's pay from his fancy job, and asked her if she would do him the honour of becoming his wife.

No girl could have resisted! 'Yes!' Bernice cried, her virginal mounds of sex-pleasure heaving in the tight shirt you could even see her bra inside. 'Oh, Norman, let us get married right away!'

They were married an hour later by the Justice of the Peace, and set off for their honey moon in the swanky Kitchen Falls Hotel, which stood on the top of a mountain outside of town and which had more than fifty different rooms and bellhops who all wore little hats. Black storm clouds were gathering, however, and it was a dark and stormy night when they at last reached their room and got ready for bed.

'Oh, Norman,' Bernice said, coming from her foamy bubble bath and sitting on the big wide bed in a little lacy negligée, 'you have made me the happiest girl in all the.. .[1]

There was an explosion of lightning and thunder outside. The girlish delight in Bernice's voice trailed away, and her eyes went wide at what the lightning had so horrifically revealed.

'I am not your "Norman",' said the thing as it lurched toward her, a snarling grin upon its face and a hellish light inside its eyes as they ran all over her delectable female form. 'I have merely taken control of the puny *hu-man* who you know as Norman's body. I am a space alien, from a galaxy so many miles away that your mind cannot imagine them! I am Queegvogel Duck Duck Duck Duck Duck Duck Seven, come to kill all Earth men and to breed with all Earth women...'

Bernice Summerfield looked at the thing who had once been Norman Manley a little strangely, through narrowed eyelids. 'Oh, do you really bloody think so?'

'What,' the thing inhabiting Norman's corporeal form seemed a little nonplused by this sudden change in tone, and made it take an involuntary step back, grazing a calf quite nastily on the corner of the mini bar. 'What are you -'

'I don't think so,[1] Bernice said, reaching for the zipper in the back of her neck, and pulling off her Human Being suit. The thing that had been Norman Manley stared, aghast, at the form that lay within, a thing now bulking itself outwards on a telescopically articulated, polysilicidal skeletal structure, internal organs unfolding in some dimensionally complex manner as though from nothing, the retractable carapace that extended over them, encasing them, effectively, in a sheath of living armour...

'Fifteen thousand years,' the monstrous creature snarled, looming over the now quite frankly terrified thing that had once been Norman Manley, jagged-talon'd claws clenching and unclenching as though only the merest thread of self-control prevented them from tearing him apart. 'Give or take. That's how long we've been working with our guys - and it's a thankless bleeding task, I can tell you. I mean, we've only just got the buggers to the point where they put the bleeding *seat* up, let alone down afterwards! So if you think we're gonna let a bunch of little sods like *you* come in and have us start again from scratch, you've got another think coming...'

The creature put its face close to that of what had once been Norman Manley. 'So come and have a go if you think you're hard enough, slime boy, or, tell you what, why don't you just piss off back where you came from?'

If active and sufficiently advanced satellite-based tracking systems had been trained on that particular area of the North American continent, they might have tracked the vector of a sad and rather diminutive glowing ovoid as it rose and set a dispirited and vaguely elliptical course for the far side of the moon, where a larger vessel waited. Once line-of-sight transmission could be established, and had they been capable of registering the correct frequencies, the radio-telescopic dishes of humanity might have noted and decoded the exchange detailed below. But they weren't and they didn't and they weren't, and so they didn't:

'Report, Queegvogel Duck Duck Duck Duck Duck Duck Seven,' said a brusque and somewhat atonic voice from the mother ship. 'Is the world of puny humans ripe for foul unending domination?'

'Yeah,' said another and slightly more enthusiastic voice, 'and are there any *girls* down there, Queeg?'

'It's no go, guys,' said the voice of Queegvogel Duck Duck Duck Duck Duck Duck Seven. 'It's just no good. They have weapons down there.'

The was a brief, contemplative pause.

'What sort of weapons? said the first voice from the mother ship.

'Horrible obliterating weapons of devastating and utter death, okay?' said the voice of Queegvogel Duck Duck Duck Duck Duck Duck Seven. 'Can we go home, now?'

In the Honeymoon Suite of the Kitchen Falls Hotel, Norman Manley woke up and rubbed at the back of his head, which hurt real bad, like he had been drinking beer. 'My God,' he said to himself 'What happened? What did I *do* last night..?'

He realised that he was not alone, and that this other was not looking at him in a particularly friendly manner. 'You married me,' said Bernice Summerfield, coldly.

It took a moment for this to sink in. *Oh well,* thought Norman, looking on the bright side when it finally did, *at least she has nice tits...*

[Advertisement]

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A dip into our *Astonishing!* Mailbag...

Dear Sirs,

I read with interest that, according to your publication of 'The Spangled Warlords' by E. Dan Belsen, that the albedo of Jupiter is fifty-one percent. Well in some 'parallel universe' such as which your writers like to speculate that might be so, but not in this one. Please ensure against such blatant disregard for the facts in future.

- Roland Smithenson, Rope's Pine, Colorado

Quite so, Mr Smithenson, and please accept a years' subscription of Astonishing! *in return for pointing out this error. We can't think how this error* *escaped the genius of Mr Belsen himself, or indeed our own stringent editorial eye. The albedo of Jupiter is, of course, something completely different.*

Dear Sirs,

What is wrong with young people today? Whatever happened to those proper tin cans like things used to come in? And why don't things cost the same as they did?

- Walter Knapf, San Francisco

Good questions all, Mr Knapf! If we ewer find the answers to them, rest assured well be the first to tell you.

Dear Astonishing Stories of Unmitigated Science,

I am writing to protest about the story scene between Dr Juliette and the lab technician in Miron Wiblik's story 'Timmy Don't Add Up', which spoiled an otherwise fine story. I read Wiblik's GOLEM Incorporated stories for their fine story-telling and their stories of advanced algorithmic-vector integrating automata, not to see stories where the story is about people kissing, and so I did not like that story.

- B. Turing-Series 11, Modex Transputations, England UK

We're sorry that you didn't like Prof Miron's yarn, Mr Turing-Series (your free subscription will be sent to Modex Transputations PLC in merry old England, *since you did not supply a home address. We hope you and your 'mates' will enjoy it while supping on your plates of whelks and ale down at the local 'pub '!) We thought long and hard about its publication in* Astonishing! - *but we must move with the times, after all, and felt that the importance of its subject, and the reputation of Wiblik himself justified its inclusion despite its somewhat 'racy' nature. Never fear, though, our then Assistant Copy Editor, Elanore Dunblaine, was consistently on hand to remove anything of so much as a remotely gratuitous and salacious nature. Miss Dunblaine be greatly missed.*

On a related note, we here at Astonishing! *would like to apologise for a certain passage in Dexley Blandings 'Boo-Bomb Boffo and the Talmerdian Spa' which appeared in the same issue. At the age of 86, Miss Dunblaine was unaware of the use to which the youth of today put the word 'flu neh ing'.*

Mr Blandings will not be writing for Astonishing! *again.*

Termination on Golgotha

by Dexley Blandings

The assault craft ploughed into the swamp with an explosion of sludge and superheated steam. Concussion-bolts detonated and a Teflon-coated butterfly hatch racked itself back and up into its housing in the polyceramicized, fractured-prismatic shell. Chris Cwej worked the action on his pulse-pump, slamming a subatomic charging cell into the inject-breech and priming it, and dropped from the hatch, the shok-pads of his boots taking the impact on the soft, still steaming ground.

The Golgothian wildlife shrittered and whooped in the swamp around him. Cwej flipped a switch in his helmet and a sensor-readout unfolded on the virtual screen chipped into brain behind his eyes: a troupe of inquisitive fomprats were circling cautiously off to one side, but, given their carrion-eating nature, there would have to be one Sheol of a lot more of them and Cwej himself would have to be dead before they'd feel brave enough to move in. Cwej shouldered the pulse-pump, quickly double- checked the other systems of his power armour's antipersonnel package, and set off in the direction of the transponder-blip he'd tracked in orbit.

At last, he thought, after a quarter of a galactic-standard century of searching, after twenty-five Earth years of following a hopscotch interplanetary trail, of hunting down rumours, of dead ends, wild goose chases, red herrings, dead ends, dead red herrings and of beating people viciously in four hundred and seventy-three separate planetary and/or orbitally-based space bars... at last he neared the ending of his search, the termination of that long,

long arc through space and time that had begun with the destruction of all the young Chris Cwej had held dear.

Even now, wading through the foetid swamps of Golgotha, the memories came back to plant hooks in his cythernesically implanted mind and score it. Memories of the blasted ash and rubble that had been his homeworld, the bones protruding from the ash, of finding the remains of his mother, father, grandmother on his father's side, brother, half-sister and beloved tame pararat, Cyril, and the abominable things that had been done to them before they died. Memories of the brutish Minions who had broken his legs and hands and left him for dead. Memories of his discovery by the emergency- service forces of Earth, of his recovery and enlistment, his desertion and his wanderings thereafter, making his way through the violent chaos of the Galactic Hub and out into the even more violent, lawless tract-gulfs of the Outworlds... all the while searching, never giving up, searching for the creature that had done this to him.

Searching for Volok.

And finding him.

'It ends here,' Cwej snarled, baring his teeth behind his impact-visor, though there was nobody to see or here. 'It all ends here and now.'

The hut was strangely small and unprepossessing, little more than the size of a sublight SAD pursuit-ship, its irregularly octagonal form lifted from the swamp by pilings cut from some local equivalent of wood. A shallow flight of mismatched steps led to a blank, stout-looking doorway.

Cwej mounted the steps and hammered on the door with the stock of his pulse- pump. 'Open up! Open up you bastard!'

After a few moments, the door opened with a squeal of rudimentary hingesprings, to reveal a hulking and Gorgonic form, its claws and the individually cantilevered incisors of its jaws clotted with festering gobs of fleshy matter and with old, dried blood, its eyes burning with an ancient and unknowable hunger that seemed a form of madness in its own right.

'Can I help you at all?' it said. It was wearing Tartan carpet slippers, and was in the process of removing a triocular set of eye-glasses, which it now began to polish with a little cloth. A pipe depended from one corner of its slavering jaw, a particularly pungent variety of alien Shag burning in the bowl.

'I want Volok!' Cwej snarled, levelling the ejection vent of his pulse-pump at the monstrous form. 'Volok the Riever! World destroyer! Volok whose hands run wet with the blood of a million women and children!

Give him to me now...'

The creature frowned as though in momentary puzzlement. 'Excuse me one moment.' It turned its horrid head to shout back to the reeking dark beyond the door. 'Delbert/'

There was the sound of movement inside the hut; a muffled crash and muttering.

'Delbert!' the creature shouted again. Its voice devolved into a coldly murderous growl. 'Come out here. I want to *talk to* you ...'

A second creature appeared. Though equally horrible in form, it was smaller and seemed to be a younger than the first. 'Yes, dad?' It looked past the other caught sight of Chris Cwej and visibly blanched. 'Oh shit...'

Til "oh shit" you, you little bugger!' the larger monster cried, belabouring the smaller about the head and shoulders. 'You've been sweeping across the worlds of Man like a corrupt and all-consuming fire again, haven't you! Grinding the bones of mothers and their sons beneath your iron heels!'

'Aaow, dad!' cried the younger, clutching at its head protectively with its jagged claws.

'What did I tell you about turning the skies black with the bodies of the burning dead?' the older creature thundered menacingly.

The younger looked down at its monstrous feet and muttered something sullenly.

'I can't *hear* you...' growled the older creature.

'All *right!'* the smaller creature snapped. No-turning-the-skies-black-with-the- burning-bodies-of-the-dead-if-I-want-to-live-under-your-roof. *Okay?'*

'Kids, eh?' said the older creature, turning its attention back to the now completely astonished Cwej. 'Can't live with 'em, can't put a blaster-bolt to the back of their heads and put them down.' It took the younger by the ear and dragged it back inside the hut. 'Please accept my most profound apologies. Won't happen again.' It slammed the door behind it.

Cwej looked at the flat expanse of wooden door.

'Urn...' he said.

Books from the *Astonishing!* Bookshelf

Reviewed by Stanford Groke

It's been something of a thin month for books, what with one thing and another. The big-shot houses seem to have misplaced our name on their review list, with the result that we have yet to receive copies of their latest output. Never fear; though, reader; judging from their efforts of the recent past, such output will consist of such perversion and squalor in the guise of 'psychology', such subversive, Godless propaganda and such so-called 'speculation' that flies in the face of all we know to be good and decent in the mind and heart of Man, such filth that would make the mind sick just from the reading of it, that the loss of them can only be a blessing.

To make up for that, we have two real treasures for you. **The Best of Astonishing!** (Goblinslather Press, 445pp), in which you can read and savour again all the highlights you have read and savoured in these very pages. From Wiblik's justly-famous and Nebula Award-winning 'Robot is Intransigent', to Grand Master Henshaw's 'The Precise Ballistic Ellipsoid from the Asteroids to an Orbital Circumlocution of Io' to the far-out brain feverings of Bindings' 'Wardrobe Eating Nanny's Arm', this surely is an indispensable compendium for historers of the SF form. *[Unfortunately, due to an error in the production stage, all bound copies of this book have been pulped and are no longer available - Ed.]*

Our second book is of another stripe entirely. While not being Science Fiction in the proper sense, **Future Impact: The Apocalyptic Backlash** (PractiBrantis Enterprises SA, 414pp) by Dr John Smith, is of vital importance to all those interested in the future of mankind and what futuristic things it will bring.

Dr Smith, as readers of these pages will know, has long led the life of a recluse, disappearing for years at a time in the company of his young 'assistants', appearing in public only sporadically to originate such neophysical concepts as the cheese drive - first championed in *Astonishing!* - the discovery of Pellucidor and the PractiBrantic processes that have informed one tenth of the American-speaking world. For years now, it seems, Dr Smith has been secretly refining and expounding his theories as to just what, precisely, has gone wrong with the world - and now, at last, in *Future Impact,* he presents his conclusions.

As we grow older, says Dr Smith, the world makes cumulatively less sense. Things you used to buy for a penny become ridiculously expensive on the level of a factor of ten, Empires set to last a thousand years collapse seemingly overnight, the young people with their pompadours and electrical beat-combos begin to talk in what, increasingly, becomes gibberish to any sane mind, peppered with a blasphemy and outright filth that seems to come about as a matter of course. For too long, says Dr Smith, such phenomena had been dismissed as market-forces-driven monetary inflation, the social dynamic or being a senile old bugger who should do the world a favour and just die.

The truth, as detailed in *Future Impact,* is somewhat more alarming.

The world as we know it, Dr Smith asserts, is being actively invaded by Futurity. Far from merely, as we once thought, travelling through time at a second per second, we are in fact *accelerating* through time at a second per second per second, the physical matter of the universe falling through the fourth dimension toward some unknowable end like a collection of ornamental balls dropping to a concrete floor. And at some point - Dr Smith estimates it as within a decade - we're going to hit it.

The effects of this catastrophe are being felt in our own time, the shock and shards of it rebounding to intersect with and impact upon our timeline - discrete packets of what call only be called parareality which, in the same way that humour operates by the collapsing of some textual structure under reality, turns the very world around us into dumb and incredibly rotten old jokes. As proof, Dr Smith presents excerpts from any number of popular publications, the product of and mirror of our world, the texts of which show such inconsistencies and glaring shifts in tone as for it, cumulatively, to be virtually inconceivable as the mere result of the intransigence of writers, the incompetence of editors, production cock-ups and the fact that publishers are, without exception, a bunch of faceless corporate gits who should be stuck against a wall and a bolt-gun applied to the back of their heads.

The future, without question, seems bleak - or possibly not. Loathe to end on such depressing terms, Dr Smith provides one possible solution, involving the co-operation of all nations and the sinking of all private resources into a project to tunnel into the earth, extract its molten core and mould it into a massive grappling hook, which will then be fired back through time, in the hope of catching onto something and bringing the temporally headlong plunge of Planet Earth to a stop. Indeed, he speculates, that with the collapse of the more monolithic world powers and the animosity between them, the increasing disappearance of the high-profile rich under mysterious circumstances and the fact that there seems to be less and less actual *money* around these days, such plans might already be secretly in effect.

Of course, Dr Smith concludes, the ultimate result would be a planet hanging on a line and swinging back and forth through Time. So, whoever you are, wherever you are, it might be an idea to make sure you're doing something nice - reading this fine issue of *Astonishing Stories of Unmitigated Science!,* say - because at any moment, you might suddenly find yourself doing it over and over again, forever.

Epilogue

'But there's one thing, Doctor, ' said Benny, 'that I

don't understand. ' There were in fact a lot of things she didn't understand about her recent experience, but a lot of them were vague, disturbing in a way her mind shied away from thinking about. 'You said that we were turned into fiction, into words on a page. I have no idea what that's supposed to feel like, but it certainly shouldn't feel like it did...'

'Yeah, ' said Chris, scratching at his head as if to reassure himself as to Its reality as an object. We *were in a world. We could move through it. It seemed perfectly natural - even the changes to our minds and bodies, which we didn't notice until afterwards. ' 'Exactly. ' Benny looked down at her once-again trim figure. 'I don't know about you, but it was a wonder I could stand upright. '*

'You're thinking in the wrong terms,' the Doctor told them. 'Those higherdimensional... well, I suppose well have to call them Entities. The Entities we encountered perceive our entire universe, manipulate us and it in a way that the humanoid mind is quite simply unable to comprehend. Words-on-a-page Is merely the closest analogy with which our minds can cope. On those terms, the massive galactic upheavals we've encountered of late have been the equivalent of the character-rights of a line of books changing publishers. On our level - on the humanoid level - entire lives are being simply thrown

away. When I found you and Chris, you were inhabiting what was essentially a pulp-fiction spin-off series written by congenital idiots. '

Benny remembered the things she had thought, the ways in which she had acted, and shuddered. 'So what did you do? How did you get us out?'

The Doctor smiled. 'I operate on slightly different levels than the humanoid. Slightly different levels than the Entities themselves. I simply went back in meta-time and fed them certain... ideas. And I kept on feeding them until the contextual weight became insupportable and the text of the universe deconstructed itself once and for all. There's no way these Entities are going to regain control of it now. Our universe will simply carry on, self-consistent within its own terms and without their ineptly guiding hand. '

'So, all's well that ends well?' said Chris, who was well known for saying things like that.

'I suppose so. ' The Doctor's face momentarily clouded 'Though when I'm finally put on trial for my Crimes against Sentient Life, one of the first charges on the sheet is going to be the invention of incredibly pretentious bog-postmodernism...'

"Pulp Cutaway"
By
David A. McIntee

It's the year 2099, and this long-lost set of extracts from a forgotten story are reconstructed....

FADE IN:

Blackness. Distantly, the strains of Bowie's "Life On Mars" can be heard.

TITLE CARD (white lettering on black): "PULP CUTAWAY"

1. Blackness. There are voices, talking excitedly.

BRETT

Is that what it looks like?

ROGER

Yeah, man, it must be. I mean, what else could it be?

BRETT (admiringly)

Shit...

Fade up - or more accurately fall down, as a briefcase lid does exactly that, revealing two young white guys - Brett and Roger - and a black kid, Marvin. Brett is preppy and blow-dried, Roger has a flock of seagulls hairdo, and Marvin is clearly feeling that he's into something way too deep. They are in a cheap apartment room.

There's a long pause, as they look at each other, and weigh the pros and cons of having something so valuable in their possession. Especially something so valuable which they're expected to hand over to someone else.

BRETT

I wonder how much it's worth.

2. EXT. HOLLYWOOD BLVD. DAY.

A blue 60s British phone booth is sitting incongruously on the corner at a crosswalk. The camera moves past it, catching up with two new arrivals getting into a cab.

3. I NT CAB. DAY

This pair are THE DOCTOR and KATE. The Doctor is short, wearing a brown jacket and panama hat, and carrying an umbrella with a question-mark handle. Kate is a girl barely out of her teens and barely in the slinky dress she's wearing. Though upper- class, she eyes the local shops and cars with a predatory air. The driver is a large but sassy Latino woman, ESMARELDA, who is clearly listening intently, though she doesn't say anything.

KATE

Not as much security as I'd expected. Not nearly enough motion sensors in the jewellers'...

THE DOCTOR Feeling
nostalgic for the old days?

KATE
A good career isn't just something you do, it's who you are - even if you aren't currently practising in that particular discipline.

THE DOCTOR Very
true. But I didn't bring you here to
indulge in shopping.

KATE
I'd be surprised if you did. Not that it bothers me; these American fashions aren't quite the newest. If we were in Paris or Milan I might be tempted, but as it is...

THE DOCTOR As
good a reason as any for not going to
those places.

The cab stops, and Kate and the Doctor get out.

4. EXT SUBURBIA. DAY

Hollywood suburbia, full of little apartment buildings. As Kate takes a couple of steps away, the Doctor leans back to Esmarelda.

THE DOCTOR You
know where to be next month?

ESMARELDA (nodding)

It'll look like a lucky break.

THE DOCTOR

Everything you do is fortuitous for someone. Few people can say that.

The cab drives off, and the Doctor joins Kate. He points to a high floor with his umbrella.

THE DOCTOR

That's where we're going.

KATE

Announced or unanounced?

THE DOCTOR

Announced, I think. We have a friend to make.

FADE OUT.
TITLE CARD: "The next day"

5. INT. WAREHOUSE. NIGHT.

Not just a warehouse, but a rock shop. Beakers and arcane chemistry equipment are set up on tables, with strange solutions bubbling through, and crack conning out at the end of the process.

There are no technicians around immediately, but the strains of loud music can be heard coming from a little trailer against one wall - obviously someone is taking a coffee break.

We pan up to the skylight above, and see a figure open it. The figure slides silently down, and reached the floor, then pads silently over to slam the trailer door shut and bolt it from the outside. That done, the intruder rips of mask and legging to reveal herself to be Kate, still in the little black number, and goes to open a side door.

The Doctor enters, with ANTWAN ROCKAMURA. He's half black, half Samoan, and the last time Kate saw anything this big, the Japanese were harpooning it.

They look through the bizarre equipment. Apart from the crack, there's a separate table on which a strange blue substance is being distilled.

ANTWAN

What is this shit?

KATE

Not quite the way I'd have phrased it, but the feeling's definitely mutual.

THE DOCTOR

It's brain fluid.

KATE

You mean they make this from brains? Put them in a blender?

She and Antwan look queasy at the thought.

THE DOCTOR

No. They're hormones generated by human brains under the influence of narcotics, and can be extracted without harming the victim. At least, without harming him any more than his addiction does.

ANTWAN

Freaky shit, man. What does the bitch-queen of the universe do with that?

THE DOCTOR

(Examining a beaker full of something unidentified and revolting)

The inhabitants of the planet she "looks after" have neurochemical imbalances. Being a chemist, the Rani's obvious course is to try treating it chemically - but the more she does that, the more she creates further imbalances farther down the line.

KATE

Like a domino effect.

THE DOCTOR

Exactly.

Antwan has been thinking about the last couple of sentences.

ANTWAN

Whoa, man. What do you mean "the planet"?

THE DOCTOR

Exactly what I say, Mr Rockamura. The Rani set herself up as the ruler of the planet Miasimia Goria some time ago...

ANTWAN

You're tellin' me these folks are aliens?

Antwan figures he can handle that - he's seen Sightings a few times on TV.

THE DOCTOR

Precisely. And it's an alien who's
running this place.

ANTWAN

Aliens? We ain't talking about those little grey motherfuckers from X Files, who go round stickin' probes up people's asses are we? Because if we are, then I don't want nothing to do with this shit.

THE DOCTOR

Don't worry. This alien looks perfectly human - on the exterior, at least. Besides, the important thing is that she's trying to be subtle. She's not interested in conquest.

Kate, meanwhile, has found a safe, and rapidly opens it.

KATE (disappointed)

This is far too easy.

She pulls out a briefcase, and opens it. A glow illuminates her face.

KATE

Wow.

The Doctor goes over.

THE DOCTOR

Fascinating... An electrochemical field held in balance and still active. Ingenious.

KATE

What does it do, though?

THE DOCTOR

In and of itself it doesn't actually do anything. But if you possess it, and have the sort of equipment available to the Rani, you could use it as a base to tailor viruses or control mechanisms to attack the physical body or personality of the original donor. Put it back.

(to Antwan)

You can call your people now. Have this place destroyed.

This is Marsellus Wallace's nightclub, and he's there with a bodyguard. His visitor is alone, yet Marsellus is strangely laid-back. MARSELLUS WALLACE is heavyset, with a shaved head and gold earring. There's a band-aid over the back of his neck.

THE RANI is pretty much pissed off. Though approaching what would be middle-age in a human, she's still striking, and looks like a soap star who's just taken the ride down from Rodeo Drive to do some of her more relaxation-oriented shopping.

RANI

We had a deal!

MARSELLUS (coolly as always)

Don't sweat it, Lady R. What Antwan did wasn't nothing to do with me.

(all the same, he can't help fingering the band-aid on the back of his neck.)

RANI

Nothing? Are you so weak you can't control your own underlings?

(He reacts)

Don't even think about it, Marsellus. I still have my insurance. I made sure that it wasn't damaged in the fire your man set.

MARSELLUS

You're lucky I'm a gentleman. I'd kill a man who talks that way to me.

RANI

You mean I'm lucky I was smart enough to take what I did from you. But I suppose you're right. You wouldn't have dared to do something like this unless you had it back yet. Then I trust he'll be punished?

MARSELLUS

As a matter of fact, some brothers and I were just about to cruise over to Antwan's place, and explain our grievances to him. You're welcome to come along, if you want.

RANI

I think perhaps I will.

7. INT ANTWAN'S APARTMENT. EVENING.

It's a typical SoCal apartment, on the fourth floor. The furnishings are actually quite pastel and quiet, but there's a huge stereo and TV against one wall.

Antwan himself is sitting on a settee, nervous, while the Rani and Marsellus sit opposite. One of Marsellus three goons has just laid a tray of coffee on the little glass table between them.

MARSELLUS

What's your problem, man? Why'd you fuck up our shit when things were going so smooth?

ANTWAN

I did it for you, Mr Wallace. I had to take a stand.

MARSELLUS

I appreciate your thoughtfulness, Antwan, but I got two problems with it. One, I don't need nobody to stand up for me. Two, this shit don't sound like you at all. How come you suddenly ain't smart enough to just follow orders?

ANTWAN

I just thought some more, that's all. After what the Doctor said-

RANI (interrupting)

The Doctor? Describe him.

ANTWAN

Little runt with an umbrella, and a funny accent - Irish or something.

RANI (to herself)

Scots...

MARSELLUS

You know this guy?

RANI

Yes... I should have expected something like this. Leave him to me, at least for the moment.

MARSELLUS

And Antwan?

RANI

You said something about punishing him. I suggest you carry on with whatever organisational discipline you had in mind.

MARSELLUS

Antwan, you gone and let me down. Now, as your employer, I got to let you go.

The goons who accompanied Marsellus and the Rani grab Antwan, and haul him out of the chair. Marsellus helpfully tosses a small stool through the lounge window as the heavies frog-march Antwan towards it.

ANTWAN

No! NO!!!

The Rani walks over to the screaming man, and puts one finger on his chest.

RANI

If you learn to fly on the way down, I won't hold it against you.

She pushes, and Antwan topples backwards out of the window INT GREENHOUSE

Looking up the wall of the apartment block. A large spread-eagled figure grows larger and larger... Glass explodes in our faces just as Antwan's falling body blots out everything.

The same warehouse from scene 5, but now it's a wreck, everything charred and blackened. Two men are looking at the devastation, shaking their heads. The pair are in their early thirties - JULES is black with a very 70s Afro and sideburns, while the white VINCENT has slick hair and bootlace tie.

Vincent is just tucking a mobile phone back inside his jacket.

VINCENT

No rest for the wicked. Marsellus wants us to find a guy calling himself the Doctor. Says he was the guy with the balls to arrange this.

JULES

The Doctor? What is he, a chemist?

VINCENT

Maybe, how the fuck do I know? Runty little guy with an umbrella who was with Antwan last night. They locked me in that fucking trailer for three hours.

JULES

Umbrella? You mean a parasol, don't you?

VINCENT

No, man. A parasol's a girly little lace thing. This was a fucking umbrella. I dunno why he has it. Maybe it's some sort of weird fetish.

Jules looks at him for a couple of beats.

JULES

Fetish?

The Doctor and Kate are approaching the TARDIS, when a car pulls up in front of them, driven by Vincent. They turn to run, but an armed Jules is behind them.

JULES

Excuse me for interrupting, but there's a lady and gent who're very keen to meet you two.

10. INT CAR. DAY.

It's a 74 Chevy Nova, but still in good condition. The Doctor and Kate are in the back seat, with Jules and Vincent in front.

JULES

(remembering his last conversation with Vincent, and Vincent's comment on Kate's dress) You call that a "fuck-me" number?

VINCENT

Yeah.

JULES

That is not a "fuck-me" number. It's definitely provocative, but it's not a "fuck-me" number.

KATE

I don't really appreciate this kind of language you know. You'd be thrown out of Daddy's club for it.

JULES

Well, I dunno your daddy, but at Marsellus' club, nobody gives a fuck, so shut up.

THE DOCTOR

A typically human reaction. I often don't know why I like the species so much.

VINCENT

Well, pride in one's own race, maybe.

THE DOCTOR

Humans aren't my own race.

VINCENT

You're sayin' you ain't human?

THE DOCTOR

Yes. I thought I'd made that eminently clear -

JULES

If I may interject a moment.

The Doctor and Vincent look at him.

JULES

Now, pardon my scientific ignorance, but you appear just like so many other members of the genus Homo Sapiens.

VINCENT

Yeah, you know, it's a sex thing. People have 'em. Like, they get obsessed with having some sort of object on or about them at all times, which turns 'em on even more than the body of their chosen partner. Or sometimes it stands in for their own genitalia

JULES

I know what a fetish is.

(a beat)

So, you're saying the umbrella's a phallic thing, then?

VINCENT

Well, I dunno; I din't talk to the guy. But it could be. Anyway, that's the guy Marsellus was talkin' about; the Doctor.

A thought visibly hits Vincent

VINCENT

And there was a girl with him... Yeah, the jailbait in the "fuck-me" little black number.

9. EXT HOLLYWOOD BLVD. DAY.

THE DOCTOR

So do you... Appearances are purely perceptual.

JULES

See, my friend (he indicates Vincent) and I, we have a problem with this particular line of bullshit you're spinning for us. Logically, human appearance is a result of millions of years of evolution based on the conditions of this one small planet, right?

THE DOCTOR

Well...

JULES

And it is therefore reasonable to assume that a different planet with different composition would produce different lifeforms. So if you are an alien like you say, then how come you ain't some freaky-lookin' totally non-human motherfucker with all tentacles and shit?

THE
DOCTOR Voldek's theory of
parallel evolution says -

JULES

Who be Voldek? I ain't askin' no fucking' Voldek; I'm askin' you. Voldek can just leave his ass out of this - if I want Voldek's opinion, I'll beat it out of him.

11. INT WAREHOUSE. DAY.

The Rani is clearly packing up. Roger and Marvin are moving crates around, and the briefcase is on a small table. The Rani nods as Jules and Vincent usher the Doctor and Kate in.

RANI
(to Jules and Vincent)
All right, you can go.
(they leave)

THE
DOCTOR Another group of
lives destroyed without
thought?

RANI

I prefer to think of the more valuable group I'm saving. The brain chemicals produced by those under the influence of this particular product are essential to my people.

THE DOCTOR

And what about the poor wretches you condemn to slow deaths, just to satisfy your scientific curiosity?

RANI

They condemned themselves, when they chose to become addicts. And this is no mere scientific curiosity; their contributions are helping save lives on Miasimia Goria. In fact, what I'm giving these "drop-outs" is cleaner than the supply they'd get from anyone on this planet, so .their lives are lasting longer too.

THE DOCTOR

Longer - and more miserably.

RANI

I suppose that depends on whether they're "half-full" or "half-empty" type of people. Or whether you are.

THE DOCTOR

Half a glass is half a glass.

RANI

You and I know that, but these...?

THE

DOCTOR It's easy to justify
anything with semantics.

RANI

Even if you were right, my standards still let me have a clear conscience. Can you say the same?

THE DOCTOR

I'd be very worried about anyone who claimed to have a completely clear conscience - especially on a foundation like that. There's a balance sheet to be filled in in the hearts - and you need entries on both columns.

RANI

You always did have a flair for hypocritical pretension. I don't know why I even bother wasting my time with you.

THE DOCTOR

(appealing to her, recognising a
possible angle of attack)

Perhaps because that conscience isn't as clear as you'd like to think. Perhaps because you know there's another way.

THE RANI (amused)

The way you make these arguments in response to anything I say is so Pavlovian. I almost regret never trying you as an experimental subject, to see if there's a neurological reason for it. I'm sure there are few misaligned synapses in there.

THE DOCTOR

And I thought I put too much faith
in empirical science...

RANI

You can never put too much faith in science, Doctor. It's all we ever really have.

(she beckons Roger and Marvin over. Then, to them)

Take the Doctor somewhere appropriate, and dispose of him.

(a beat)

Oh - shoot him in the head; make very sure to do that. Otherwise you might be in for a nasty shock, and I'll be lumbered with more irritating interference.

ROGER

(gushing, thinking of her possible soap-queen gratitude) Oh, yeah, right. The head; cool. We'll do that.

12. EXT. INDUSTRIAL WASTELAND. DAY.

Even from the outside, the warehouse is a wreck.

ROGER

Sorry about this, man, but we gotta it, you know. If we don't, we'd be next.

KATE

That'll look good on my tombstone.

There's a sound of police sirens from a neighbouring area. They aren't getting closer, but the sound startles Roger and Marvin enough for the Doctor and Kate to knock their guns away and run for it. By the time Roger and Marvin recover, they're too late to catch the pair.

They look at each other for a long moment.

MARVIN

If those two ever show up again, we're fucked.

ROGER

What else can we do? Not go back?

They exchange a look of mutual understanding, and each fire a couple of shots into the air. Then they go back to the warehouse.

13. APRON AT LAX. DAY

Marsellus and the Rani pause beside a private jet.

MARSELLUS

What about my... Your
"insurance?"

RANI

Do you think I'm stupid enough to give it to you in person while you're undoubtedly armed? A couple of our mutual couriers are taking it to your night-club. It'll be waiting when you get back - assuming, that is, that I make a check-in phone call once airborne.

MARSELLUS

It better be.

14. INT LAX TERMINAL. DAY.

Marsellus is walking along past huge windows, through which the Rani's jet can be seen to take off. Suddenly his mobile phone rings, and he answers.

MARSELLUS

Yeah? Marvin? What's up?

As he listens, his expression darkens. The screen splits, with Marsellus - on his mobile at LAX on the left, and a shit-scared Marvin on the right, talking on an apartment lobby payphone.

MARSELLUS

What is this "more money" bullshit?

MARVIN

Just what they said, Mr. Wallace. I tried to talk 'em out of it, but they wouldn't listen....

MARSELLUS

Okay, then; you did good. Where you all at?

MARVIN

Ellroy Apartments, #442.

MARSELLUS

Then you chill out, Marvin. Relax, and get something to eat.

(Marvin looks like he couldn't dare eat - or keep anything down if he did).

I'll be sending Jules and Vincent out to rendezvous with you, and set things right. You be cool.

(Marsellus disappears, leaving only a worried Marvin staring at the phone, which he hangs up after a beat.)

FADE OUT

Isolation

The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of
Christopher Cwej of Earth, Adjudicator:
who lived eleven months, all alone in an un-
inhabited island on the coast of Malthus,
near the mouth of the great river of Queoroonro;
having been cast ashore by
shipwreck, wherein all the men perished but himself
With an account how he was at
last as strangely deliver'd by Savage Beasts. Told
by himself.

By
Gareth Humphreys

I'm dying now. Yes, my spirit is finally parting company with my tired, broken body. Things are so much clearer in my mind now. They always say you see your past flash before your eyes, but all I can see is my island. And I'm getting closer to it every second...

The sea boiled. Midnight black, tossing furiously. My heart was racing to keep up with the thundering wind. Lightning seared my eyes in every imaginable colour. The heavy sails spat saltwater. I could barely stand up as the hurricane rolled the ship up and down. We weren't going to make it...

Lurching. Flailing. I'm slipping, falling, crashing into the wet blackness.

Down. The currents are tearing at my body. They're tugging at me relentlessly, pulling me deeper and deeper.

Long buried memories shoot through my head.

Somehow I feel the arms of my long-dead colleague... the icy touch of her fingers... Roz

So sweet her embrace. So easy to give in. She whispers in my ear.

But I can't surrender yet. I mustn't listen...

Plunging deeper into the darkness, I feel my body being torn this way and that. Somehow I must have survived.

CWEJ DISK DIARY
FIRST ENTRY :

September 30 -

I, poor miserable Christopher Rodonante Cwej, am shipwrecked on a wretched island far from anywhere.

Well, I suppose that sums it up, doesn't it?

I should be dead, I suppose.

We were traders. Crossing the tip of Malthus Cape. I had my doubts about this voyage, I know, but I'm the only one who survived.

I'm the only one.

I remember my first sensation coming to on the beach. Salt stinging in my eyes, sand in my nose. I felt like death. I threw up and kept throwing up, until I was trembling with the cold. Alive. I blessed the pain, it meant I was alive.

I crawled to my feet and looked around me. Emptiness. An endless deserted beach. Please, don't let me be the only one. I stood, still shaking. Breathing. So easy. One breath after another. It meant I was alive.

Not one of my good shipmates were so lucky. Not even their bodies had made it to the island. The crumpled silhouette of the ship was dashed to bits against the rocks. I was alone. Marooned and imprisoned. But it meant I was alive.

I've been here a week now and this is my first entry into my solar disk-diary, so I'd better clear up a few things, OK?

I'm a natural Earth-born human, although I've bodybeppled a bit and still have sharp nails. I was an Adjudicator a long time ago. Anyway, I got into the habit of travelling. With a Time Lord, would you believe! But things got tough, my partner, Roz, died and the Doctor moved on. I ended up with my old friend, Bernice Summerfield. But it didn't work out. Her people weren't my people. Anyway, my feet started to itch. I headed off for the outer planets as I'd heard there were good trading prospects there. I settled on Kreutznaer, a Beta 3 Grade colony. That's how my current problems started.

Sea-ships here are not sophisticated. Sailing ships is what Benny would call them. No planes, no cars, no skimmers - nothing. As I'd spent my money getting to Kreutznaer, I just had to get on with it. I was seasick a lot to start with, but that didn't stop me. No way. I just ploughed on.

Now I'm reaping all that I sowed. The only survivor of a trading ship, stranded on one of a thousand islands in the sea. Alone.

I remember my first day on this planet. The smell of Kreutznaer Spaceport hit me as I left the docking bay. This was it, I'd made it! My first step onto my new world. My life was really my own, now.

Folsporth was not only the landing station for off-worlders, but also the main marine shipping port of the country of Zanderia. It was an old, old city, built like a rabbit's warren. I had been given a work permit and an address at Immigration. Finding it though, was a nightmare.

As I said, Kreutznaer was a very old Beta Three colony. It rejected modern technology because it was too expensive or maybe they were just too bloody-minded! It took me close to an hour to find a helpful native who understood me. All I managed to do that first day was find my lodgings and buy some food.

The following day was made up of the usual, frustrating job-hunting. No one wanted to know me, so I got to know a local pub very well. Filled with bluster and very strong alcohol, I took up the offer of a trader called Captain Selcophos. Weird to think that he's dead now. Anyway, he was middle-aged with a rough face and a grey beard, but his eyes looked wise and honest to me. I was so drunk, I probably thought he was a space captain. As the old story goes, I woke up on board ship the next morning heading out to sea.

My hangover was probably one of my worst ever, topped up by the fact that it took me at least a week to find my sea legs! Now I was signed up as a sea trader in anything and everything. As the weeks went by, I threw myself wholeheartedly into sailing. Believe it or not, I started to enjoy it and I even made some friends.

But I felt very bad about conning some trusting tribespeople with trinkets for their gold. It just felt wrong to me. It was almost as if we were heading for disaster.

It's too easy to give up in my position. Why the hell am I alive? Why the hell should I bother? And it can so easily be hell, if you let it.

If I'd been spared for a reason, I'd better make something of my life. Never give up, that's my motto!

That first night, I climbed up a Barnabus tree, feeling exhausted, I tied myself to its thickest branch. Darkness crept slyly round me, covering the landscape in night. It might have been stupid, but for the first time in ages I prayed, giving thanks for my survival. Then sleep and the sound of the sea surrounded me.

ENTRY ENDS

Eyes are watching me. Great big Eyes. I can't see them, but I know they're there. Staring at me. I feel cold. I'm in the ancient Transit underground system, wind whips round me. It's then that I realise, I'm completely naked, clutching a teddy bear. I buckle my body vainly trying to keep my modesty, but the Eyes keep watching, leering...

Alone. I'm so alone.

The darkness billowed and then...

I can see her naughty green eyes, the wrinkle of her nose.

I hear her infectious laughter.

Amber. Her name was Amber Berry. Her lips were like fine, red cherries.

Long brown hair with a slender figure, Amber was not the sort of girl you'd meet on a Fellowship

Weekend. No, sir!

Falling in love is something I tend to do quite a lot. Then it's always her face, her eyes, her smile, her... I'm so wonderfully happy. Everything she says or does is just perfect. I just carry her image in my head all day and when I actually do see her I'm a completely happy idiot.

I'd met Amber when I was on the Under-18 Skiffball team. She was a college supporter. I was seventeen and she was a little older. We'd already been out a few times. I remember her mischievous smile. Her skirt was as short as her legs were long, she swayed in my direction. My mates were wolf-whistling and I blushed furiously. Amber just smiled broadly.

'Come to The Cinders, Chris,' she begged. 'Meet me after Monday's practice at West 44th and I'll take you there. Twenty-one-hundred hours...'

The Cinders was where Amber worked. It was a nightclub, she said. Amongst other things, my mates said. Quite respectable, usually, she told me. Except it was situated in a notorious part of the Undertown, of course. But she had me hook, line and sinker.

Amber. I was ambling with Amber. Gambling with Amber...

...the Doctor's old grey eyes are looking at me kindly. He's saying something to me. Something I can't hear for the sound of the sea...

I was newly showered but my body still ached dully from training. Slipping on my best shirt, jacket and synth-jeans, I went out. The dark had crept up on me as I'd tried to find my way to West 44th. Amber was waiting dressed in a tight blue dress. She smiled. 'I thought you weren't cornin',' she whispered.

'Well, I had to fight a lot of guys to get here!' was all I could manage.

She gave me a playful punch in reply.

The Cinders was not the sort of club you'd want your mother to know about. Tucked away from prying eyes in a dimly lit alley, the only indication it existed at all was a small broken neon sign of a small flame flashing now and again.

We got inside the door, then virtual darkness. All I could see was Amber's seductive smile in the half-light beckoning me on.

We reached a stairwell. Down, down, down we went. Her stiletto heels clattering against the metal, taking me reluctantly deeper into a private little hell...

NEW ENTRY:

I woke up to my second day. The tree was full of strange birds, fluttering and singing. Still here, I thought. Still stranded. I stretched and untied myself from the branch.

Oh, well, best get on with it!

Morning brought new challenges. I'd been washed up on the shore of a tropical island. By heading to the highest tip of a nearby hill, I had a view over all sides of my new home. There didn't appear to be any wild animals, only a herd of passive, but meaty pholox. Still, I got this feeling that something else was here. Just round the corner or behind a bush. But maybe it's just I'm not used to being alone.

My first, but most important discovery was a fresh water stream. I was so glad to see it that I stripped off my torn clothes and just jumped into it. Man, it was FREEZING! And yet drinking it was like drinking the best Draconian wine. Just touching it made me feel drunk.

Once I had settled a few days, I got fed up of trying to sleep in tree branches and began building myself a dormo-shelter from what I could salvage from the ship. I swam across to the remains of the wreck and later set about carefully building a raft so that I could bring as much as I could to shore.

On board, I found there was a store of salty meat, biscuits and fish. Best of all there was a logbook and an old book on the plants and animals of the Malthusian continent. I also found a bottle of rum. I spent three days shifting it all, before the sea finally swallowed up the ship.

Finding a dry cave on the island, I began to store all that I'd got. I was very lucky with the weather and the need to bring all my stuff together gave me that extra push. All the same, I thanked my basic Adjudicator training and natural strength.

I soon realised that the logbook was hopelessly out of date, but I still hoped that I'd be rescued soon. Night and day, I'd keep a bonfire going at the top-most part of the island. Someone was bound to notice it, I was convinced.

I got thinking about the Doctor. I remembered the last time I saw him and my last trip in the TARDIS. It was on his home world, Gallifrey and we had left Lungbarrow, his ancestral home. The Doctor was recovering in his ship and he told me to go on ahead. As I was about to leave, he looked at me with his sad, grey eyes.

'Keep out of trouble, Chris,' he said quietly, reaching into his pockets and digging out a silver necklace. 'It's called a St Christopher's, Patron Saint of travellers,' he explained. 'Just in case you need it,' he added, reaching up as I bowed my head low to help him slip it on my neck.

'Doctor, I... urn. Thanks!' I said, feeling the cold metal tingling against my chest.

'Now, you'd better be on your way,' he turned away from me.

I dashed out, not quite hearing something he was saying about a savage beast. Then I was bounding away down the slope to the others...

Despite my large store of salvaged food, I knew I'd need to become self-sufficient. Taking the recovered book as my guide I found the Kreutz language a barrier. I could only manage the odd word, so I'd have to rely on the pencilled illustrations. I quickly realised that I had to maximise whatever I could get from the fields. Despite my time in Malthus I was never a great farmer, so I had to start learning. This book would provide the roughest of guides.

ENTRY ENDS

NEW ENTRY:

I shot my first pholox today. It's cooking right now on a spit! I have a flask of rum in my hand. Yes, I've decided to celebrate today! I've been here about two weeks and I've managed to adapt the cave into a proud little dormo-shelter. I've been trying to play skiffball on the beach today using a barnanut, but its not much fun on your own. The rum must be making me nostalgic as I'm thinking about my good friend, Bernice Summerfield...

I'd been on Dellah for about a month. Benny had arranged accommodation for me. It was fine, but I was beginning to get itchy feet. You know how it is. It must have been Spring. I don't know why, but the whole set up at St Oscar's was starting to get on my nerves.

Things really came to a head one night. I'd spent the evening with Benny in the local pub, Witch and the Wardrobe, I think they called it. Whatever. I'd felt a bit out on a limb. Benny was telling a few students some story about Chelonians, while I was stuck awkwardly on the side of the table. I didn't even hear the punchline. Later, Benny passed me to go to the bar. She staggered a bit and gave me her most winning smile. Suddenly, she slumped down next to me.

'I've been thinking, Chris,' she started, trying to keep from slurring. 'I've arranged for you to enrol in the law department. Think about it...' she tapped my nose.

'What? Benny, why?' I mumbled.

'Well, you're an add-uji-tator. Well an ex-adj, adj... you know, p'liceman. You should study law on Dellah.' she smiled.

'Urn, yeah, well I...' How could I respond?

'Think about it Cwejjy!' She punched my arm and kissed me on the forehead, before staggering to the bar.

Some hours later we were all swaying out of the pub. They burst into song:

'...No wonder I get lyrical, about that certain miracle...'

Not my kind of drinking song!

A finned, green Mijkro lurched to a 'puterbooth and well, relieved himself to the laughter of the rest of the crowd. Benny gave a witty response that I didn't quite understand, and the rest of her students started applauding and cheering her. There was an invitation for a night-cap, which most of them accepted. I made an excuse that I needed to get some sleep. Benny reached up and gave me an affectionate kiss, before I headed to my room. I watched as they disappeared noisily away...

My burning pholox woke me out of my daydream. Always happens doesn't it! When you sit down to relax, something makes you get up. For the rest of the afternoon, I tried reading some more of the old books, but my eyelids got heavier and heavier...

ENTRY ENDS

I'm running down the darkened tunnels again. They're still watching me. No time to wonder who they are - I've got to keep running. It's dark, so dark here...

All I could see was Amber's seductive smile in the half-light beckoning me on.

We reached a stairwell. Down, down, down we went. Her stiletto heels clattering against the metal, taking me reluctantly deeper into a private little hell.

When you're seventeen and your girlfriend takes you to a club, most guys would expect to have her company at least. I wasn't so lucky.

My first impression of the club was of darkness, coloured with a stifling red. Half illuminated figures were shuffling about in the corners. The air stank of tobacco smoke and other illegal drugs. I felt wary, but Amber pulled me in. The place was full of nearly naked girls. Men were hovering round, cackling and leering in the shadows. Two Drahvin clones were sipping champagne in a corner. All sorts of things seemed to be going on in the shadows. No one took any notice of us.

Amber left me in the main lounge as she went to work.

'...And it's been the ruin of many a poor boy, and God I know I'm one...'

Some Draconian businessmen were crooning to some old song with streams of half- clad VirtualGals in bowler hats and frozen smiles swinging their bodies to the rhythm of the song. My eyes grew bigger, and I began to blush as I saw their clothes being virtually removed...

There's blood on my hands. It's wet and it's cold.

When life leaves a body, what's left? When the spirit's gone, it's only a shell. A sad echo of what was once so dear.

The Doctor is there again, whispering. I can't make out what he's saying for the rush of the wind.

And a scream.

Someone's crying? Is it me?

NEW ENTRY:

Today, I've been out hunting. I've also been trying to fish. What would Benny think of me now? Roz would be proud, I'd imagine. It was part of her heritage and now it's part of my everyday life. As a good farmer, I must look after the land and harvest everything the island has to offer me. I've built myself a wooden pen to hold my herd of pholox. Each morning I must milk them and make sure they've got enough food and water.

Still haven't seen anyone else on the island, though I still get that itchy feeling that someone's there. Not sure what I'd do if I found someone. I've got some ancient guns and some gunpowder, so I could defend myself. I must keep a rifle on me at all times, just in case.

I've been alone here over two months now. My current project is to improve my basic dormo-shelter. This has meant cutting down some of the trees. I'm now a dedicated carnivore and woodcutter! I've also decided to use some of the salvaged seed grain to attempt to grow my own crops.

Whilst hunting, I've been exploring the rest of my island. It's slightly larger than I'd imagined. Having been all round the shoreline, I haven't found any sign of flotsam nor any other survivor. And yet, I still get a feeling that I'm not quite alone.

I found something really weird on the beach on the far side of the island, last week. Some sort of large boulder or rock. It had a kind of shiny sort of blue colour. It seemed quite tough and was way too heavy for me to roll. There's a tiny crack in it, but I can't see if it's hollow or not. As far as I could see, it must have been brought to shore by the tide. There were traces of seaweed around it. So all in all, pretty useless for me, worse luck. And yet, it made me wonder what it was.

The animals of my island seem to take to me, I've already been adopted by a really cute young dlonk kid, who neighs when I feed her. There's also a parakantos bird that sticks by me. I'm hoping to teach him to speak. One day I'm definitely going to hear another voice.

At night, it gets very dark and I feel very lonely. To keep myself going, I try remembering the earliest stories of my childhood. The tale of Jonah particularly, gives me some comfort. Sunset gets earlier every night, so my hours of reading and relaxing are getting much shorter.

I think back to my last days on Dellah. It was late. We'd been drinking. Benny gave me an affectionate kiss. Then I headed back to my room watching as they disappeared noisily away... I drifted off to sleep to the gentle pitter-pattering of the constant rain.

Noises began to filter down to me.

Ringing, singing.

Someone was singing. Something about Dellah-ding-dong? Ding, dong, dell...

Moments later there was a rushing round, a banging on my door. I was awake. A crash. I leapt out of bed and stumbled for the lights. A short, wide-eyed teenager was blubbering in my doorway. Emile.

'Chris! Chris! It's her pussy, Benny's pussy...' he gibbered.

Sorry, but I nearly burst out laughing!

He was looking at me. No, staring at me in my Daffy Duck boxers. I put on my nicest smile and reached for a shirt.

'Calm down, Emile, what's... What's wrong with her... Is it Wolsey?'

'Yes, yes Chris. He's dead. They drowned him...' Emile was getting flustered and seemed to be blushing.

'You've got to come! Pussy's in the well!' A gangly, blue-skinned boy was behind Emile. I tugged on some shorts and a pair of boots and dashed after them.

A crowd of aliens were crowding round the drenched cat. Some sort of perverse student prank. Benny was in the middle shivering, shaking. I pushed through, reached down and gave her a hug.

'Oh, Chris, how could they? How could they?' Benny was whispering, the rain running through her short hair...

ENTRY ENDS

Billowing darkness.

I turn the corner. Got to get away. The Eyes see everything...

I'm in The Cinders again. One of the girls with long dark hair sauntered up towards me. Smiled, and whispered, 'I saw you when you came in and...'

I gulped, went red, and then blanched. I moved and turned into one of the shadowy alcoves at the side of the main lounge.

There was a youth sitting down beside me. I got up. But he put his hand on my shoulder and smiled, indicating I should sit down. He was a good few years older than me, with dark, wavy hair.

'Do you know 'er?' he whispered.

'OH, CHRIS, CHRIS! HOW COULD YOU?'

A face swam up from the past. David Daniels. I remembered the Quadrant. I was on Earth with the Doctor, investigating psi powers. Before Roz died. David was talking about sex. We were on surveillance. I was deep in thought. He was leading me away. 'Well, then,' he said.

'Well then,' I replied.

He reached out to touch me, but I brushed him away.

'Come on, Chris,' he whispered.

I stumbled backwards and he fell on top of me. I lurched out of his grasp. He was reaching down towards me. His lips were on mine. In my head, I saw Amber kicking and screaming and I was lashing out, hard...

'No!' I choked. 'Sorry, man I can't...'

David slipped off me, disappointed. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to... urn.'

'Really bad thing, when I was younger... don't talk about it...' I gasped.

'Would you like to talk about it...?' he asked.

I smiled at him. 'OK. I'll try. I'll tell you about Amber...'

Dark blood runs on to my uniform. Staining my fingers, running down to my feet.

The Doctor is there with his wise kind eyes, 'Don't forget what I told you, Chris!'

I DIDN'T MEAN IT!

I'm sorry. Forgive me, please...

'That's it Chris, spit it out! Puke the whole crooking filthy world out...' Amber was crying...

I'm running down the dark tunnels...Got to get away!

NEW ENTRY:

The longer nights were just the start to the rainy season. Only a few days ago I'd made a parasol out of Barnabus leaves, to shade my blond head in case I got sunburnt. Now it's completely useless! Although the rain helps my crops, it's cut down my movements. As I've extended my dormo-shelter, all my belongings and my animals are dry.

Suddenly, I had all the daylight hours to myself. Re-arranging my daily pattern, I took to trying to teach my parakantos bird to speak. I'm calling him Jonah. Initially hopeless, he started croaking back some of my worst curses. I blushed and tried to get him to repeat my name. 'Chris-toph-er!' I urged the bird to say. Instead, he continued to curse loudly.

With a lighted torch I can read and learn in my cave. I spent hours, carefully reading and re-reading each page. I began to recite the passages, in the hope I'd make sense out of it. Slowly the words began to make some sort of meaning. Encouraged, I took to writing out a rough translation. It might have been a kid's book, but it was my only guide to how to cultivate the local vegetation.

Days passed quickly, as I began trying my hand at making a chair or stitching some rough sailcloth into trousers. My first pair turned out to be too small and it itched like hell. Still they had to do.

For relaxation, I rationed some of the old tobacco I'd salvaged from the ship. This was another bad habit I'd picked up whilst on Kreutznaer. But it gave me a chance to think after a frustrating day indoors.

I've always been an outdoors person. When I wasn't longing to fly, I'd be off on Fellowship Weekends. That gave me and my mates a chance to see what remained of the natural world. The trees, the fields and real birds and animals. The air was so much cleaner there... I wonder where my old friends are now?

The dlonk kid is proving more intelligent than I thought. She follows me around and looks up at me as if I was her dad. She sighs contentedly when I need to carry her on my shoulder. I've decided to call her Benny. At night when it's raining badly, I'd find she'd be nestling at the end of my makeshift bed, keeping my feet warm. It reminded me of Bernice's cat, Wolsey. Poor old Wolsey...

Benny was in the middle, shivering, shaking. I pushed through, reached down and gave her a hug.

'Oh, Chris, how could they? How could they?' Benny was whispering, the rain running through her short hair...

The cat wasn't dead though. A pulse was still there. Fifteen minutes later, Benny and I were sitting next to an open fire in her room. Wolsey was sprawled on the carpet in front of us. Emile and his friend were hovering and chattering behind us. Benny's music system was playing an ancient sad song, about clouds rolling by. Joseph the porter had managed a quick reassuring diagnosis, but Benny was still pale and cold.

'He'll pull through. Nine lives and all that.' I said.

'That's the deal, Chris,' she said quietly. 'We all get to live awhile, as long as we die at some point. But not today, he'll be alright now.'

Her words cut me to the quick. I remembered Roz.

'Oh, Chris I'm sorry, I didn't think.' Benny apologised.

Too right, you don't think, I thought. But I just smiled my big, reassuring smile. 'You're right, you have to make the most of every day you've got with the old rascal.'

She smiled back.

The cat was stirring. For an instant, I hated that bedraggled ginger mammal. How could anyone feel sorry for such a spoilt animal. What about all the creatures he'd killed? But Benny loved him and I loved Benny.

Emile was cooing and reaching out to tickle the prone cat. Wolsey batted a paw, nicking the boy's hand.

'Do they know the bastards who did this?' I asked.

'Yes, but they'll be sent to a counsellor. So it'll all work out.'

That was the final straw.

'Counsellor?' I stood up. 'They tied a brick round your cat's tail and threw it down a well for a prank. What do they need a bloody counsellor for?'

'Well, to see what's wrong with them and help them out,' Emile trotted out with a smile. Was he staring at my legs?

I swore under my breath.

Benny looked up at me, 'That's the way we do things round here, Chris. I can't help it. I'd love to flog them with an inch of their lives, but... In the end it's for the best.' she smiled.

ENTRY ENDS

NEW ENTRY:

The storm was fierce and seemed to go on for days, making every day so bloody dark and depressing. I took a short trip outside with my useless parasol to check on my crops. I came back, feeling dizzy.

I felt as if I was very, very drunk. I must've caught some sickness. I was sweating and shaking. I don't know how, but somehow I managed to get into the dormo-shelter and crawl to my rough bed. There was no real reason why I should feel so bad, but I was completely defenceless. No matter how concerned my dlonk kid was it couldn't even bring me a glass of water, let alone some medicine. As for Jonah... My head reeled. The bad dreams were slipping into my head. I tried to concentrate on happier days...I felt so hot.

Malthus was a hot, dry country. I stared across from the veranda as the sun beat down on the acres of green crops. My crops and my veranda.

It was six months since I'd parted company with Captain Selcophos. I'd eventually proved to be a valuable member of his crew, which resulted in good payment. I bought a small amount of land in Malthus and with some hard work and good workers, I managed to set up a decent farm.

Maria, my elderly housekeeper, was serving me supper. She smiled and started chatting. I felt calm and relaxed. The glass of wine went to my head and eased my aching muscles. By the sweat of my brow I was earning my daily crust, I thought.

They lay eggs, huge blue eggs. They very dangerous. Wicked. All the old people say they come from the dark seas...' Maria was talking about the Belamuki. Some local bogeyman. If the crops failed or a child went missing, it was the Belamuki that got the blame. Maria knew all the local superstitions, though since she'd been educated by missionaries, she was also always dismissing them.

My thoughts drifted. It's getting too easy here. Something nagged at the back of my head. I'd been seeing a local girl, called Errana. My life was just getting to be too content.

Strange isn't it, how we always seem to get a bit of calm before the storm? We just never realise it, until the storm hits us.

As the sun began slipping below the horizon, dazzling my fields with gold, I heard the approach of a horse.

Selcophos slipped off his grey horse and tethered it.

'Cwej! You're growing fat, my boy!' he growled.

Smiling, I walked over to greet him, urging Maria to bring out another bottle of wine. The grizzled captain sat down beside me.

'Farming, now is it?'

'Well, I suppose so. I've been some months at it...' I replied.

'Bored stiff, I can see. You know the sea misses you. Everyone misses you!' he smiled.

'I'm settling down here... I've met...' I began.

'Now, Christopher. I'll be honest. We need to take one more consignment to Zanderia. The crew, we all miss you. No, we need you on this trip. It's four months. The money's good and it's purely a one-off. I'd like you there. You're a man I can trust.'

I was stumped. Without this man and all the hardships I'd endured on the sea, I wouldn't be here. Yet, I didn't really want to give up my farm. But when I thought how boring it was all getting and of my good shipmates, I became more certain.

'Look,' I spread my hands out, 'I'll have to get things organised, but I'll give you my answer tomorrow.'

The Captain looked sceptical. 'We sail at mid-day tomorrow. If you join us, be there. We'll need you.'

I went to see Errana that night. We kissed passionately in the dark of her room. I waited until after we'd made love before telling her of my plans. She was angry.

'I love you, Chris. You don't leave me. Not let you,' she cried.

I cradled her in my arms, caressing her gently.

Til be back for you. Just four months. We'll have forever afterwards.' I whispered. I felt her back straighten.

'I maybe wait not for you,' she replied.

'You better had. I'll bring you a present. Anything you want.'

'I want you,' she was barely audible.

'Well, I've got to go,' I got up and started dressing, 'Kiko's in charge 'til I get back. I'd better go now. I'll see you when I get back.'

'You no see me again,' she said in a small, resigned voice.

I leant down and gently kissed her neck. I sensed she was crying and there was
nothing I could do about it.

Her whispers haunted me as I boarded Selcophos' ship. There was nothing I could do.
I had to go. It was in my blood.

The voyage was a rough one. I still had doubts about its morality, but I got a buzz from the respect and comradeship of the captain and crew. The weather got rougher every night, until finally on our sixth night we were hit by our worst-ever hurricane.

The sea boiled. Tossing furiously, midnight black. My heart raced to keep up with the thundering wind. Lightning seared my eyes in every imaginable colour. The heavy sails spat saltwater. I could barely stand up as the hurricane rolled the ship up and down. We weren't going to make it...

ENTRY ENDS

NEW ENTRY:

I don't know how long I've been lying here, my head is spinning with memories. Stuff that I don't want to remember. All I know is that my fever's getting worse. I'm slipping into bad dreams and the memories keep getting worse...

ENTRY ENDS

It's darker now and a stifling hot air is rushing around. The tannoy system is croaking something I can't make out. All the while I feel the Eyes watching.

Errana turned to look at me for one last time. In the half-light, I saw images of every girl I've ever loved on all the worlds and in all those times, reflected in her eyes.

I'm so alone.

Then they appear. Girl after girl, in a line down the tunnel. Roz stands before them all, she looks troubled. I reach down to kiss her, but she whispers in my ear.

'Don't forget what he told you, Chris!'

I gulp, go red then blanche, 'I'll make it up to you, I promise.'

Turning round I find myself in The Cinders.

I move to one of the shadowy alcoves at the side of the main lounge.

There was a youth sitting down beside me. I got up. But he put his hand on my shoulder and smiled indicating I should sit down. He was a good few years older than me with dark, wavy hair.

'Do you know 'er?' he whispered.

Roz's body was prone, naked and bloody. Her mouth was smeared with cheap lipstick and a rivulet of blood oozed across the floor.

No.

NO!

'Do you know 'er?' he whispered.

'Amber? I know Amber,' I replied.

'This one's for free,' he said softly.

Without pausing the youth reached out across the table and kissed me. I was shocked. He kept on kissing me, his tongue worming its way into my mouth. His hand was on my neck, sliding down my shirt.

I froze.

Sticky, sweaty hands crawled like a spider across my chest.

I felt sick.

Disgust boiled in my stomach. I lashed out, kicking him where it hurt. Hard. I kept kicking and swearing at him. Amber was beside me tugging me away from the bleeding man. She then started kicking him herself.

'What do you think you're doing to my boyfriend? Get out!'

People were shifting around in the shadows.

She turned to me, 'Bloody NOAH dealers ! Better spit that out, Chris... Chris, are
you all right?'

I was spinning, nausea was gripping me.

People were crowding round me.

'Know 'er', the boy was a NOAH dealer. The illegal ads spun in my head - 'Just say NOAH!'

Next thing I knew I was outside, throwing up violently. I was shaking, screaming, spitting and frothing at the mouth. Then I was convulsing, shivering with the coldest cold I'd ever felt. From somewhere far above me Amber was cradling me like a child cooing gentle, reassuring words...

'That's it Chris, spit it out! Puke the whole crooking filthy world out...' she was crying.

I lost consciousness...

I slept with Amber that night, or rather we slept in the same bed together. I was too weak and my head was too full of strange things for me to attempt anything else.

I crawled out of bed at five in the morning. Amber stirred and put the night light on. 'I have to get back to dorm,' I whispered.

She smiled, studying my naked body. I felt uncomfortable.

'Not much use to me last night, were you?' she giggled.

Til make it up to you, I promise.' I leant down to kiss her neck.

'Course you will, my Greek god.' She was staring at me again, as I tugged on my uniform. But her smile and her wonderful green eyes made it all right.

'I'm all human, I promise,' I replied. Then with a final kiss I left her.

Alone. So alone.

Stiletto heels clattering against the metal, taking me reluctantly deeper into a private little hell...

I stumble along the tunnels. There in the distance I see a crumpled figure propped up against the curving wall. As I get closer, I see that it's a girl. She's half naked, her green skin is tinged with sores, some of which are bleeding. I reach out to touch her. She looks up.

Dead green eyes. Lips like cherries. Amber.

Oh, God. No. Please not Amber... 'Savage beasts,' she whispers.

NEW ENTRY

I've got a good reason to celebrate today! I've managed to get up from my bed and although my legs are still a bit wobbly I've been able to make it to the larder. I'm recovering and the storm has gone.

But best of all today I heard the first voice in months!! Jonah, my Parakantos bird spoke to me for the first time, 'Christopher Cwwedj! Pooor, Christopher Cwwedjl' I promise you, I nearly kissed the sulky old thing!

Today, I'm almost happy.

Tomorrow, **I** intend to go and see how my island has coped without me. **ENTRY ENDS NEW ENTRY**

I'm feeling much better now. The bad dreams seem to have slipped away. The weather is much improved and believe it or not, some of my crops have taken hold. My animals are really glad to see me. I think they probably prefer my food to their own foraging for stuff.

It's been a few weeks now since my illness. I've made some defences for my island, should any would-be rescuer turn out to be unfriendly. I've also been marking my days

on a log in my cave, so that I get some idea of the time.

Things seem much pleasanter on my island and I seem quite content here. I still feel some regret for not returning to see Errana. But I've settled with my new life, as I imagine she has. People always do.

As I said, times of calm always come before a storm. This time was no different.

I was walking on the beach, the far-side beach, where I'd found that weird rock thing.

I was wearing my homespun trousers and holding my parasol to keep the sun away. Then I came across it.

Footprints in the sand. And they weren't mine.

Suddenly, it wasn't a lovely day any more.

I followed the tracks carefully. That was when I saw her.

The early sun was dancing on the rich blue sea as she slipped up from beneath the waves. Her hair shone like threads of pure gold, her skin glowed like bronze. She was tall, humanoid, beautiful and very naked.

I gulped and dropped my parasol.

She came towards me and smiled. She stroked my hair. Warm thoughts filled my head. She was speaking to me, but I couldn't understand what she was saying.

Then she kissed me.

We made love on the beach.

Hours later, I took her to my shelter and fed her. She kept smiling and caressing me. I tried to show her how I worked, but we were soon in each other's arms. Making love again. And again...

She kissed me, then I fell asleep.

ENTRY ENDS

The Eyes are watching again. I'm in the tunnels, cradling Amber in my arms. The tannoy system above our heads has begun to croak again. A song, a children's song. About teddy bears in the wood...

Her stiletto heels clattering against the metal, taking me reluctantly deeper into a private little hell...

'That's it Chris, spit it out! Puke the whole crooking filthy world out...' Amber was crying.

I was on traffic patrol that night. Proudly starting my career as an Adjudicator. It was a fairly quiet night, no crises, and no emergencies. I sat back and began counting the hours. Watching the minutes tick by. Quarter past. Half past. Quarter to. Full hour. Again and again, I was almost hypnotising myself. .

Then, the call came through. An accident. Two suspected fatalities.

Adrenalin surged through my relaxed body as I swept my skimmer to North-East Five.

I stepped out of my craft. Coervers and Lawson were already there, sifting through the wreck.

Coervers reeled off the sit-rep. 'Harlot on NOAH, by the looks of things. Must have been entertaining a client when she OD'd. We suspect he might be a dealer, can't be sure. She should have said NOAH!' he quipped.

I entered the cabin carefully. Lawson followed. She laid a reassuring hand on my arm. The girl was prone, naked and bloody. Her mouth was smeared with cheap lipstick and a rivulet of blood oozed across the floor.

Suddenly, I felt the whole world disappear. I recognised her.

Amber Berry. Her lips were like fine, red cherries.

My body was shaking. But I daren't show that I recognised her. It was years since we'd drifted apart. Now she was inches away from me. Dead. Was it my fault? Did I let her slip into this? Centuries seemed to pass, as I tried not to reach out and stroke

Amber's cheek.

Lawson slipped an arm round me, 'Hey, Cwej. It's OK. Always rough the first time. Coervers, let's get things moving!'

Was it my fault, Doctor? Do you know? Is that what you're trying to tell me?

He's not saying anything, of course. Just smiling inscrutably. He raises his hand and points. I look beyond him into the darkness...

No, no I won't remember this. I don't want to remember this... Please no more, no more!

I was mitching classes that day. Fourteen years old and easily bored. I dodged through the registration count and slipped onto a public flyer. It might not have been the most beautiful of flyers, but just to be in the air, to see the ground falling away - that was enough for me.

It was on my journey home, that it happened.

The thing that I don't want to remember.

I'd snuck into the last flyer back to my home area. I was feeling proud of myself, though a bit guilty. I found a seat in the back of the flyer, next to a tired old black woman. She was listening to a digidisk and was knitting. I sat next to her and stretched out my long legs with a confident smile. I felt like a top skiffball player who'd scored the winning goal of the Championship.

I was about two-thirds of the way home when the man came in to our section. He was in his thirties, wearing an old worksfit and looking rough. Although the flyer was only half-full, he made his way to the back and sat at a right angle to me. I turned my attention to the scenery, ticking off each landmark and working out my roundabout way home.

It was then I noticed. He was looking at me.

Don't be stupid, you're imagining it.

This couldn't be happening now, I was too relaxed and happy.

He's still looking at me.

Must be lost, a stranger. No, reason why he'd want to...

I should have stared back angrily or sworn or stormed off to the next section. But I'd left it too late and what if he followed me...

I'm tall, I play skiffball, I'm a boy. This isn't happening, I'm not in a movie. But he was still looking at me. Studying me. I took in a breath and pulled my legs back. Had he thought I wanted him to stare at me?

I concentrated on the window, my calmness all drained away. I felt a wave of fear rise up inside me. And anger too. Why hadn't I stared back at him? I'm letting him make me a victim.

The old woman is nodding her head to some unheard tune. From the corner of my eye I see the man is still leering at me. He slips his hand to his waist and starts to make slow, discreet suggestive movements. But I'm not looking. I won't look. Whatever happens I'm sticking with the old woman. She'll keep me safe. I knew I shouldn't have missed classes. I'm sorry.

The flyer stopped.

The old lady picked her things up and moved out. I followed her, hoping that I'd only imagined the man's actions. I went straight to the front of the flyer, not daring to look behind me. But I could hear him breathing. I sensed the man sitting in the seat behind me. I could feel his eyes on the back of my blond head. I looked around but the other passengers didn't notice anything. In the darkened window, his distorted face kept staring at me. Don't look. I mustn't look or he'll recognise me again.

The flyer was now filling with more and more passengers from the offices. Mindless chatter seemed to melt away the tension.

Then I felt a hand on my neck.

I froze.

The hand moved down my shirt. Sticky, sweaty hands crawled like a spider over my chest. I felt sick. I launched myself to hit out, but I was getting too scared.

What if he strangled me? Was he going to kill me?

Without warning a girl tumbled onto me. She apologised. The hand snaked quickly away. I took my chance. I ran out of the flyer, seconds before it took off. Hoping I'd lost my attacker. I walked home quickly, more frightened than I'd been since I was a child. Questions beat to the panicking rhythms of my heart.

What if he knew me? What if he followed me? What if he caught me next time?

I never told my friends.
I never told my tutors.
I never told my parents.
I never went out.
I never missed school.
I worked harder.

I played harder.

But then things got better.

I got braver.

I got stronger.

The fear faded.

Then I went out again.

I never saw the monster again.

The dark is all around me again. Eyes are watching me. Great big Eyes. I can't see them, but I knew they're there. Staring at me. I feel cold. I'm in the old Transit underground system, wind whips round me. I realise, I'm completely naked clutching a teddy bear. I buckle my body vainly trying to keep my modesty but the Eyes keep watching, leering...

There's a great mirror hanging on the side of the wall. I'm looking into it.

I see myself. My nails are sharp, scratching against the glass. Then I notice the reflection of a crumpled figure propped up against the curving wall behind me. Roz raises her dead face.

She speaks in the Doctor's voice, 'Music quells the savage breast.'

I turn around suddenly. Dark, furry shapes are surrounding me. I turn back to the mirror and I see my attacker's face leering back.

I wake up in a cold sweat. The girl is still wrapped around me. I struggle to get up out of my cave. The sun is beginning to set. I'm shaking with fear, my heart racing. I look from the hilltop, down below is a ship. I can't believe it - a ship!

I race down to the beach without my rifle, careless of all danger.

By the time I get there, they're all around me. Huge lurching bears seven feet tall. With Eyes like saucers. They're everywhere!

But I'm wide awake.

They're closing round me now. I throw myself to the ground. Got to get away! I sense someone else is running, scrabbling with equipment, but I can't see... I turn suddenly and crash into the wet remains of a giant egg.

I'm running again. Back to the dormo-shelter. I've got weapons there.

The girl is standing outside my cave. She has one hand raised as if she's trying to stop me. Tears are tumbling down her face. Her face seems to blur into that of my childhood attacker. I hear the relentless approach of the bears.

I'm not going to make it.

'Doctor!' I scream. 'What was it you told me? Tell me, please!'

She's got her arms around me now. Her skin is icy to touch. There's a strange unbearable noise echoing through the cave. I'm shivering. Her hands fix on my throat. She's squeezing the life out of me. My head feels like its bursting with pain.

Then suddenly, her grip slackens. She falls away, unconscious to the floor.

Behind her is a tall man with long, curly brown hair and a youngish face. He's dressed in a loose white shirt, waistcoat and cream-coloured trousers.

Time seems to freeze. Then, it flowed again.

NEW ENTRY:

'Sorry, it took so long,' the man said in a warm gentle voice. 'Couldn't find the right length of extension lead...'

'Doctor, it is you!' I gasped. My eyes were full of tears now.

He sat me down next to an ancient music player with a metal horn. 'Music quells the savage breast,' he explained. 'The Belamuki are sea creatures. A myth much like your Earth Sirens or mermaids. Unfortunately for you, they happen to be a reality on Kreutznaer. They tend to gorge themselves on bad memories, especially if it's been damaged, as this one has been. They feed on your memories, shake them around and use them against you. Like a spoilt child, kicking out against anything it sees as authority.'

'What did you do?' I asked.

'I used music to calm it down. A disk of the noises it hears in its egg. When you're ready, we'll seal it up in its egg again and cast it safely to sea...' His eyes were dancing around my cave.

'Um, I was hoping to do some fishing,' he continued slipping outside, 'And when Benny told me where you were heading, I thought I'd catch up with you.'

He popped his head back to look at me, 'It did take me a while to track you down though, despite your St Christopher's...'

'You're taller than you used to be,' I tried to speak.

'Still some way to catch up with you,' he replied gently, hopping up a tree to fetch a banana. He dropped down and offered one to me.

I smiled up at him through my tears. I was still shaking, but my ordeal was over. **ENTRY ENDS**

I'm back in the tunnels again. They're no longer dark and I'm no longer afraid. I can smile as I wander round the corridors. Good and bad, my memories are my own again. I'm climbing a steep staircase, but I see the light shining from above. As I reach the top, I find myself in the warm, sunshine of my island. My dlonk kid and Jonah, the parakantos and all the other animals greet me. I make my way happily to my dormo- shelter. I fall asleep on my bed in the sunshine.

FINAL ENTRY:

A few days later, the sun was shining again. We'd been fishing. The Doctor had quite taken to my dlonk kid, he thought it cool that I'd called it Benny. Jonah, though was still a bit wary of the Time Lord.

That afternoon, I got a chance to play skiffball, with all the animals looking confused around us. The Doctor then persuaded me to play something called footie, which he then taught me. Now that was cool. We played all day, until the light faded. Then we shared some bottles of my favourite Earth cider and played old records on the beach.

As the sun set again, the Doctor asked me to join him in the TARDIS. I felt torn. How could I leave my island? Should I go back to my farm?

I knew I didn't really have a choice. Next morning, I dismantled my dormo-shelter and freed the animals. Then I turned back to the TARDIS. Inside the Doctor laid a fatherly arm across my shoulder and set the controls.

'I'll let you off wherever you like,' he watched me as I sat down. 'You know you can always return to your island.'

'No thanks, not now. I've got a universe to explore!' I replied.

I felt completely healed. My experiences on the island had allowed me to remember and take control of my memories and my identity.

The Doctor smiled, 'Your island will always be with you, you know.'

But my mind was on other thoughts. My memories were my own again and I had unfinished business on Megacity...

I remembered leaving Dellah, what seemed like a lifetime before.

I knocked on Benny's door. She called me in. Wolsey was fully recovered and Emile was playing with it. Bernice looked tired, but had a smile on her face.

'Chris, just in time for tea and clotted scones... or something...' she tailed off. 'You know how I like my tea, Emile?'

'Yes, Bernice, with a drop of brandy to keep the cocoa's of your heart warm.' he replied, scampering to the kitchen.

'I didn't come for tea,' I started.

'No tea?' Benny looked startled.

'Well, urn, Benny I've been meaning to tell you. I've, well, decided to move on. You know - a whole universe to explore and all that. Itchy feet you know...'

'Smelly feet, more like,' she replied. 'Chris, you certainly know how to spring these things on one,' she added in mock seriousness.

'That's me - impulsive!'

'Are you sure, I mean it's nothing I've said or anything?' Benny furrowed her brow and stood up.

'No, no,' I smiled broadly and raised my hand, 'It's just without the Doctor and Roz, it's well, hard to adjust...'

'Well, promise to keep in touch. If you see the Doctor, give him my love and perhaps you can keep an eye on that errant ex of mine,' Benny pulled out her brandy flask and offered me a swig. I accepted.

Emile rushed over and hugged me. I patted him cautiously on the back. Minutes later I said my goodnight and left for my room. Almost immediately the conversation drifted to other things. I smiled, it was time for me to begin my own new adventures. We're leaving now. I'm inside the great TARDIS control room, the Doctor has some music playing. He's whistling and I'm smiling at the silly, moving words.

'...Though things may not look bright, they all turn out all right,
If I keep painting the clouds with sunshine!'

I look up from the control console, above there's a 3-D image of my island. We watch as it grows smaller and smaller as we go further away from Kreutznaer. Stars swim into view and the oceans of space washes over the fading image.

I know I'll return to my island, one day...

FINAL ENTRY ENDS

I'm breathing my last breath. No more pain. I'm drifting, seeing my body far below me. Soaring away! Faster and faster!

Everything makes sense now. *Everything* is all right. I feel the cool breeze on my face and hear the waters lapping at my feet. I'm at peace, at last, on my island.

Quicksilver Bees

By

Martin Day

He dreamt that the bees were swarming over the farmland like locusts, destroying trees, hedges and grass. They stopped only when their metal mandibles reached bare earth.

The silver cloud blocked out the light of the sun: a tiny, buzzing apocalypse. The land behind the bees was red and raw, like a wound.

Marc turned to run, but his legs felt like concrete. He pitched forward onto his face. The insects swept over him with a rush of plastic wings.

Marc awoke, screaming, but the noise was only in his mind.

He slumped back onto the bed, breathing heavily. His thoughts turned to the Rich farm, as it always did. It was all their fault. It all came down to them.

Tomorrow night, he'd sort them out, once and for all.

His dad had told him all he needed to know. He was a man of few words now, a pale figure permanently slumped in front of the screen. But, when he spoke, the splash of pixels over his face like sweat, he spoke of the old ways, the life he had once had. The truth dripped from his lips like water from a broken tap. He would hold up his hands for Marc to see, and he'd marvel at their roughness and strength. Farmer's hands, hands that had worked in time with nature, now made weak by inaction. Made weak by the Rich farm.

His dad would talk about the animals, and the crops, and the cycle of the seasons. Just for a moment, his eyes would light up. His voice would crack as he mentioned the first year when the climate changed. *Really* changed.

Then he'd slump into his chair, as if exhausted by the power of remembrance.

But Marc stored these things in his heart. He knew what to do now. Righteousness burned deep inside him like the call to a holy crusade.

When Marc emerged from the house, the quicksilver bees were already recharging in the warmth of the early morning sun. The spiralling cloud ebbed and flowed like an amorphous sea creature against the pale blue sky. Individual grey specks flashed when the light caught their gossamer wings.

Marc could hear their electronic buzzing even from the dusty road. The burbling reminded him of the sound of a Net connection, turned up loud, or the dull crackle of an untuned cable channel. It was an insistent noise, nagging at the edge of his hearing.

As if at a silent command, the swarm of bees fell from the sun's warmth, dipped down towards the ground and flew past Marc and towards the orchards thick with blossom and heavy with fruit. He flapped his arms at the bees that came near him, more in anger than in alarm. In a moment they had gone, and at last uninterrupted silence replaced the whispered buzzing of their communication.

Marc scuffed his tattered boots into the ground in irritation. The trees that led to the school were shrivelled and stunted, little more than claws of bark that scraped against the wind. The sun was heating the landscape already, baking the soil and the grass. The cool night-time respite had been short.

Marc reached into his rucksack, rummaging through the plastic boxes and wrappings. He found an apple, and hefted it from hand to hand. It was as perfectly round as a cricket ball, with a suddenly protruding stalk the only sign of its natural origins. The skin was a uniform green, the colour of remembered grass that had thrived in the rain of early spring. The only blemish was a copyright logo and a company name, picked out in red.

Despite his hunger, Marc hurled the apple, uneaten, into the fields.

The playground was full of noise and dark bodies dancing a complex pattern. Some of the younger children were playing tag towards the corner; the older boys scuffled continually in front of the girls, part out of mock bravado, part out of a frustration they could not articulate. A lone teacher sat on the steps to the school, head in his hands and obviously bored

Marc spotted Jon Richie in a moment. He was as smartly-dressed as usual. His parents could afford a full uniform, though he wore it like a suit of armour, continually tugging at the stiff collar and scratching his neck in discomfort. He was talking to some of the class nerds, his back towards Marc.

Marc barged over towards Richie, clattering into him, then rounded on the boy like it was his fault. 'Watch yourself, Rich Kid,' Marc said, extending a threatening hand towards the startled boy. 'Or you might get what's coming to you.'

'My surname's Richie, not Rich,' Jon said stoically.

'Just get out of my way,' snarled Marc. And, ignoring the surprised looks of the others, and oblivious to the exclamations of the teacher on the steps, Marc pushed his way into the cool, dark school building.

The biology lesson was sponsored by one of the leading biotechnology companies, or 'new produce providers', as they liked to call themselves. The man brought a complete multimedia presentation with him, and most of the children around Marc seemed swept up by the immersion graphics and the smooth, bland narration.

The man also had a lecture prepared, and he spoke with the keen excitement of a church leader or a politician. 'Genetic engineering, and an accelerated program of selective reproduction, has given rise to plants that are much less fussy about climate and soil,' the man concluded. 'Crops can be harvested in rotation all year round, meaning that most countries can now rely on their own farmers producing food on demand. You can get more produce from the same area of land as before, which keeps prices down for the consumer. It's also good for the environment, because these plants don't require pesticides or fertiliser - and we all know the sort of mess we've made in the past when insecticides have ended up in the food chain. The fruit and vegetables last longer without refrigeration, and contain added vitamins and nutrients, essential for healthy living.'

The man had brought along some samples of the next generation of 'biological product'. He pointed to the logo of his company, which ran down a perfect yellow banana. 'When you see a logo like ours, you can be guaranteed that you're getting the best. And, of course, these words aren't stamped on the fruit.

They're natural pigment, modified by the latest technology.' He pointed at a red-headed boy in the front row of the class. 'It's like your freckles, son, only arranged into words instead of random dots.'

The class had laughed as the boy flushed with embarrassment.

Marc hated the man even more in that moment. 'Sir,' he said, putting up his hand. 'My dad says that the new produce has made us poor, sir. He used to be a farmer, and now he's bankrupt.' He glanced at Jon Richie, sitting towards the front of the class. 'Some of our neighbours can afford the technology, and they've become very rich. But my dad and me are penniless. I thought you said this was supposed to benefit everyone.'

In the embarrassed silence that followed, the man from the new produce company stared at Marc like he was a failed experiment in the biotechnological labs. Then he turned away without answering, his eyes dark and unfeeling.

For the rest of the day, Marc found it impossible to concentrate. His mind wandered during lessons, to the Rich farm, and the damage he was going to cause. His teachers told him off, but he couldn't reign in his emotions.

The quicksilver bees flew past him again on his long walk home, having completed a day of precise pollination in the fields. Marc managed to catch one this time.

He pressed a finger against its metal carapace, holding it firmly in his palm. A Japanese-American sounding voice emanated from a tiny speaker buried somewhere within the creature, warning him to let go.

Marc stifled a giggle.

This bee was wholly artificial, with wings made from a thin but tough plastic, and an alloy body the colour of polished aluminium. Some of the bees, he knew, were cyborgs, natural bumblebees with silicone 'back packs'. When needed, the miniature computer over-rode the bee's own desires, operating the wings and legs like a remote- controlled toy. The man from the produce company had said that some delicate plants seemed to resent the intrusion of the artificial bees, but they behaved as if the 'cyborgs' were natural.

Marc thought it cruel.

He looked at the robot bee in his hand, software squirming the limbs just as a real bee would. The artificial bees needed no stinger: no animal was stupid enough to try to eat them. So, for the moment, it was trapped in his hand.

Maybe he should crush it. He knew it wasn't alive - just a bundle of parts and programming. And, in miniature, it represented everything that had happened to his father, and people like him. Honest people discarded in favour of nerds and businessmen like the Richies.

Even so, Marc couldn't bring himself to do it. Who was to say that the creature wasn't beginning to think for itself, to rewrite its own programming in new ways? He'd read a book about Artificial Intelligence once, and it had changed how he'd looked at *everything.*

'It's interesting, isn't it?' said a voice at his back.

Marc turned in alarm. He hadn't heard anyone come up behind him.

A small, dark-haired man stood a few yards away, leaning on a red umbrella. His faraway eyes stared right through Marc - not because the man was daydreaming, but because he seemed able to strip away all defences and pretences like the outer layers of an onion. It was as if, in an instant, he knew all there was to know about Marc, and his dad, and the farm.

Marc shivered, averting his gaze. In that moment, he remembered the man's question. 'Sorry?'

The man pointed to the bee in Marc's hand. Marc hadn't realised he was still holding it, even more tightly now, as if it were the last sane thing in a world gone mad.

'There's no need for it to struggle, is there? It could just lie there, in your hand, and wait for help. Or death, which ever happens the sooner.'

The man almost spat the word 'death'. He was clearly too well acquainted with it, and with suffering and pain. Marc wondered what kept the man going.

'But a real bee would struggle,' offered Marc hopefully.

'Oh, of course it would. It has others to think of. It's desperate to be part of its own future. But a machine? Just a random stacking of metal and machine code.'

'Who are you?' Marc asked. He wasn't frightened, or even apprehensive. But he did need to know.

A friend,' said the man. He smiled once, a flash of brilliance and hope, and turned smartly on his heels.

He soon vanished into the heat haze, Marc staring after him, almost open-mouthed.

Then he remembered the bee in his hand. He released his grip and, after a pause to reclaim its dignity, the bee took to the air, and disappeared into the flawless blue sky.

It wasn't truly dark until getting on for eleven. Marc lay in his bed, watching the light turn dull and coppery. His window looked out over what was left of his dad's fields - cracked, red squares of earth, framed by shrunken hedges of bramble - and, beyond that, towards the Rich farm. He could just see some of the outbuildings on the horizon, polished metal boxes and tubes like a child's play set.

Loud snoring from downstairs told him that the coast was clear: his dad often slept for hours like that, the screen sensing his lack of movement and politely dimming the sound.

Marc pulled on his ripped jeans and a shirt, and crept past the living room, boots in his hands. His father did not stir from the old couch in front of the screen.

Marc sat down on the back doorstep, tying his laces and striving to control his excitement. Part of it, he supposed, was that he didn't really know what he was going to do. By the time he got to the farm, his resolve might desert him, and he would run away like a coward. Or he might end up torching the entire place and laughing insanely like some cartoon villain.

He set off for the farm, revelling in the cooler night air and the silence. Soon the fields would be throbbing with the sound of the night-time harvesting vehicles, their headlights criss-crossing the fields of corn. A million blades, whirring and gnashing. Other harvesters, much smaller, and with gruff men at the wheel, would converge on the orchards to the far side of the farm, shaking and plucking the trees. In a single night the fruit would be gone, as if a demon had visited the area and blighted the fields with its hunger.

But the next harvest was still a few weeks away. School would continue for another week or so after that, and then... The agony, the torture, of holidays, of freedom. The summer break meant spending even more time in the house with his father, with Marc trying his best to avoid him for hours at a time, even fixing up his own meals when his dad was elsewhere. It was a relief to get away from class, from the teachers that knew nothing and the friends who didn't understand what the Richie family had done. But the relief was short-lived.

Marc's thoughts were interrupted by a droning sound; an artificial taint on the deep quietness of the night. At first, Marc wondered if it was the quicksilver bees, but there was no reason for them to be out at night, and this sound was deeper. Somehow more threatening. And it was getting louder.

A light appeared in the sky over towards the Rich farm. Marc squinted. Something angular and metallic; it was coming towards him, its rotors slicing through the air, puncturing the darkness and the silence.

The helicopter came almost directly overhead in a rush of noise and wind, sucking at the grass and stones at Marc's feet. It banked over one of the fields, and washed the sky with a torrent of water, creating impossible rainbows in its wake. The water fell onto the dry earth, and Marc could almost imagine it being sucked downwards by the thirsty soil.

The helicopter methodically followed the fields, dragging a rain cloud behind it. In a moment, it had disappeared from sight, although the drone of its engines was still audible.

Transfixed the whole time, Marc suddenly realised how exposed he was. He moved off towards the farm buildings, with less confidence than before, sticking to the cover of the shrivelled hedges and trees.

The first farm building Marc found was an enormous greenhouse. It was taller than the main school building, and could easily contain within it a couple of playing fields. Marc knew that the primary function of the glass was to filter out the harmful rays of the sun, which gave the structure a strange grey tint. Marc pressed his face closer and saw the rows and rows of identical plants within.

He skirted the building once, just to make sure that he was on his own, and then pushed open the greenhouse door. Some of the plants within were high up towards the ceiling on racks, while others grew in the dark soil that covered the ground. Still more were suspended in plastic bags connected together with tubes like tiny hospital patients on life support. Between each area ran ruler-straight paths of thick, dark plastic set into the earth.

Marc hefted a rock in his hands. He smiled as he thought of the stone smashing through the glass, sending spinning shards everywhere. Yeah, that would be good.

His attention was distracted by a blunted pyramidal structure in the centre of the greenhouse, its surface studded with what looked like little black windows. Still gripping the rock tightly, Marc walked down one of the plastic paths to the centre.

He heard a noise as he approached, the shrill electronic chatter of a thousand voices. Gently, he put his ear to the outside of the small construction, straining to make sense of the sounds. He was sure he could feel something moving within.

They're resting.'

Marc spun around in wordless alarm, his second shock of the day. He dropped the rock without thinking. Facing him was Jon Richie, wearing some sort of dressing gown and a pair of light canvass shoes. He looked at Marc with a quizzical expression, as if unsure what to say, but wary of Marc's past anger.

Marc was speechless. He had worked out what he'd do if confronted by a grownup, but he had never expected Jon or one of the other Richie kids to find him. He tensed himself to run, but for the moment did nothing. He could push himself past the other boy easily enough and run back home, but Jon had seen him, and it would only take a few moments to tell his parents and get Marc in real trouble.

Jon bent down, placing an eye at one of the tiny windows. 'This is where the bees come for downtime, you see. Once they're reprogrammed, they can go off again. During the night they do a bit of work in the greenhouses. They behave like... moths, or something.'

Marc realised that this was probably the most that Jon had ever said to him. In response, he could only mumble 'Moths?' in a voice full of puzzlement.

'Yeah. Apparently some species of moth pollinate flowers at night. So we have to precisely control that, too.'

Marc bent down to look into the hive, and could see the bees for the first time. They had come to rest on a series of slots, greedily disgorging and downloading information. Marc couldn't hide his sudden interest. 'How are they controlled?' he asked.

Jon pointed in the direction of the other farm buildings. 'The software's all at home. Dad lets me play on it, from time to time. It's fascinating.' He turned to look at Marc. 'I'm sorry about what that man said in school today. He was an idiot.'

'Yeah, well, you'd know all about that,' snapped Marc, his confusion now coming through as aggression.

Jon reacted as if he hadn't heard. 'What are you doing here, anyway?' he asked.

'I...' Marc glanced down at the rock he'd dropped; surely Jon had seen it in his hands before he'd swung round? It was the one discordant note in their precise and symmetrical surroundings. 'I was going for a walk. Couldn't sleep.'

'So you broke in?'

It seemed pointless to deny it. 'You gonna tell your parents?' asked Marc. He made sure his words were full of grim defiance, as if daring the boy to do just that.

'So that you can hate me even more?' Jon left the question unanswered as he glanced away, as if he was trying to peer through the walls of clouded glass.

'How did you know I was here?' queried Marc.

'You tripped about half a million security alarms.

You're lucky my dad sleeps like a log. The control room I was telling you about? It's closer to my bedroom than to mum and dad's, so it woke me up first. I saw you on the cameras.' He pointed high up in the roof of the greenhouse, and for the first time Marc could see tiny square eyes set into the metal girders that supported the roof. 'Thought I'd come down here. Try to say that I don't like what's happened to your dad any more than you do.'

Marc grunted. 'You know nothing about what's happened to dad.'

'I know enough. Anyway, you keep telling me what happened.' Jon paused, and Marc caught him glancing down at the rock. 'I'm sorry you hate me.'

Marc turned away in disgust. 'It's because of people like you -'

'No.' There was a sudden strength in Jon's voice that caused Marc to pause. 'No,' said Jon again, more quietly this time. 'You don't understand, do you? It's got nothing to do with us.'

'But you've got all this new produce stuff, and my dad can't afford -'

'Yeah, we've got all this hi-tech stuff. And we pay a fortune for it. When I was younger, I used to go to a private school. I've not always gone to the same school as you, remember.'

Marc did: one day Jon had just appeared out of the blue like an exotic, freshly- pressed alien. For the first time, Marc felt a twinge of guilt. He'd ripped into him from day one.

'We used to have a holiday twice a year. Dad had the coolest collection of cars you've ever seen,' continued Jon.

'My heart bleeds for you,' said Marc sarcastically, struggling to come to terms with the contradictory feelings that coursed through his mind.

Jon held up his hands as if in extended apology. 'All right, so that doesn't compare to how you live. I know that. But, to a lesser extent, we're victims, too.[1] He sighed, looking down at the rock once more. 'Trash the place if you want. I won't tell anyone.'

Marc half-shrugged. Put in those crude terms, he suddenly realised that he'd lost his hunger for destruction.

Jon scrabbled around at the side of the plastic bee hive, and found a recessed switch. The whole thing hinged open like a giant toy, revealing the shelves and complex lines of circuitry within.

Marc could see the bees more clearly now. A fine copper-coloured ridge ran along the underside of each creature's thorax, which slotted down into a recessed groove. Very delicately, Jon removed one of the creatures, and held it up. Its legs twitched furiously.

Jon smiled for the first time. 'You know, my dad is fond of saying that compared to the companies who lease the technology to us, we're all just little worker bees ourselves.'

He returned the creature to its place, and closed the hive. 'I'd better be going,[1] he said.

'OK,' said Marc.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Jon walked down the pathway to the door. Marc stood motionless, thinking about what the other boy had said, listening to the contented, ignorant chirruping of the bees in their plastic hive.

When Marc arrived home, he saw that his father had curled up on the couch like a sleeping baby, the screen having dimmed to darkness. Marc padded silently to his room, stripped off his clothes, and collapsed into his bed, exhausted.

He dreamt again of the bees. The great swarm rose in the east, and flooded the landscape. They tumbled over each other in insane delight as they devoured the vegetation as the sun burnt its way through to the soil. They came through Marc's father's farm, somehow stripping away metal from shed roofs, paint from the walls of the house. They shattered windows and clogged up tractors.

For the first time in his dream, they did not stop there, but moved on to devour the Rich Farm, all its lush land and crops. They destroyed their own hive, the greenhouses, the orchards. They left nothing in their wake but dry, cracked soil. Soon, from horizon to horizon, the sky and ground were filled with bees, chattering in electronic communication that sounded like distant thunder.

And the voices said: We are still hungry.

The next morning, the small man was waiting for Marc at the side of the road. He looked up keenly, as if pleased to see him.

'How is your father?' the man asked. There was a sad caution in his voice, as if he knew the answer already.

Marc dodged the question. 'How do you know my dad?'

The man walked alongside Marc, effortlessly keeping pace with the boy. 'Doing what I do, you get to know a lot of people, usually only fleetingly. But I thought I knew your father well.'

'And now he's a zombie, right?'

The man stopped suddenly, and stretched out his right hand. He uncurled it, slowly. Within his palm was a big yellow bumble bee. It showed no signs of having been augmented; even more amazingly, the creature was almost completely motionless. The wings moved a little from time to time, so it wasn't dead, but in all other respects it was a creature trapped in clear amber.

'Your father has become an animal that has forgotten what it means to survive. To struggle,' said the man simply. He arched an eyebrow, as if encouraging Marc to stretch out his own hand.

Marc did so, not understanding what the man meant, or how he had stopped the bee from moving.

'Don't end up like him, Marc. You have a role to play.'

Marc started at the casual mention of his name; so much so that, as the man placed the bee in his hand, that he almost dropped it. Instead, it nestled deep in the valleys of his curled palm, not moving but... Unless Marc's imagination was playing tricks on him, the bee was still warm, as if gently releasing the sun's radiation.

Marc stared at the bee, marvelling at the tiny joints of its legs, the brightly-coloured hair that covered its abdomen. He tried to imagine what it would look like if he were as small as a bee, or if the bee were larger, like one of the terrible locusts he dreamt about.

Suddenly the bee moved, interrupting Marc's thoughts. It buzzed angrily, a great shiver passing down its diminutive body - and arced its back as if to sting.

Instinctively, Marc dropped the creature, and it flew away from him.

Marc knew that a bee has only one sting, and that it leaves it behind when it uses its one means of defence, eventually dying of the trauma. But escape and fear were hardwired into its biological programming. Escape, fear, survival. Even if it meant the death of the individual.

Marc remembered the squirming quicksilver bee, and the awful inactivity of his father, and the stranger's words. And, in a moment, Marc understood.

He looked up. 'So you think I should...'

But the man had already gone.

First Person
By
Philip Purser-Hallard

Listen, I'll tell you how it happened.

A Compiler knelt in its cell, working away at its daily tasks. It was of middle age, balding slightly, portly, grey-skinned.

You know what it looked like. It looked exactly like you, if you're female. If you're male, it looked exactly like you except for the obvious. Do I have to spell it out? Leaving aside your ages and the occasional mutilating accident - which are really very rare these days on the Hive worlds - all of you clerical types look exactly the same as each other. Don't pretend you haven't noticed.

Anyway, this Compiler knelt in its cell. It was comfortable and content - its kneelchair was a nicely padded one, the tasks it had to carry out were interesting to it and not particularly onerous. Its fullsuit was that very definite charcoal-with-a-hint-of-chalk grey which marks the work of a Compiler as more complex than that of, say, an Assessor or a Calculant, while remaining free of any of the heavy responsibilities of a Reductionist or a Discriminator. The Compiler took regular exercise; it had had sex the correct number of times in the last month for a sedentary worker of its age; and its diet was adequate to all its bodily requirements. Its hardship would have served no purpose. The Compiler had no cause for complaint.

All of which was precisely as expected, obviously. I only mention it so that we're perfectly clear on the matter. Although the data's almost never accessed, apparently a capacity for slight unease with the status quo still surfaces every two or three millennia. There are a couple of genetics papers on it. The point is, even when this capacity exists it's never activated, because every body in the Co-operative has every cause to be content.

I use the words 'every body' deliberately, of course.

Anyway, this Compiler was kneeling at its desk, minding everyone else's business, directing the flow of data in and out of its temple sockets, comparing and cross- referencing and collating and all the other complicated processes which bring joy to a Compiler's life, when it heard a loud wrenching noise from the cubicle above. This went on for some twenty seconds, before coming to an end with a very definite thud.

The Compiler sent a side-query through its temple-ports, and swiftly evinced the data that that particular cubicle was empty, in the absence of a replacement for the previous occupant. The Compiler in the cubicle above had reached severance age the previous day, was now with the Proteinators pending retirement, and was not due for replacement. A cross-reference explained that the sector of space the old Compiler had been monitoring was now in the unCo-operative hands of the Francistine Order, and a replacement would be redundant until it was retaken by the Co-operative.

The Compiler rattled off a quick memorandum mentioning a possible structural or plumbing problem in Cubicle 914/56 of the North-by-North-Eastern spur, Sigma Tau Block, Graphite Building, N Hive. It continued its interrupted examination of a particularly fascinating fiscal anomaly in the galactic cloth markets, centring round Chevron Central in the Schwa System.

'Ah, there you are,' said an unexpected voice. 'I've been looking for you.'

The Compiler looked up in absolute astonishment. A small humanoid was hanging nonchalantly by one arm from the top of the cubicle's archway, framed rather neatly against the line of cells opposite. In his other arm he held a black cloth-covered stick with a red handle. He was smiling pleasantly.

The young male Compiler in the cell across the hallway looked up, saw what was going on, decided that the man was not its problem, and returned to work.

The newcomer was entirely unexpected to the first Compiler on several counts. It stared at him for quite a while, during which time it accessed the Co-operative's extensive linguistic databases to find out what T and 'you' meant. I'm sure you had to do exactly the same just now, when you started reading this. Whoops, there I go again.

The man, who had politely lifted a round fabric covering from the top of his head, now replaced it, dropped from the archway and brushed rather ineffectually at his clothing. He was wearing several garments, the outermost of which were the startling white of an Omnicrat's fullsuit. He wore a patterned strip of cloth tied loosely round his neck. His skin was a kind of pale pinkish beige.

Td prefer it if you didn't take me to your leader,' he added briskly. 'Supposing that you had a leader, of course. Do you mind if I sit down?'

The little man vaulted up onto the Compiler's desk and crossed his legs, leaning his chin on the handle of the cloth-covered stick. The Compiler used visual pattern cues to probe the linguistic databases more deeply. Archaic words like 'fedora[1], 'linen', 'trousers' and 'umbrella' began to flood its brain. (Look them up - they're fascinating.) It shook its head, confused.

'You're rather quiet,' said the man, frowning deeply. 'Is something on your mind?'

'Urn,' said the Compiler, trying out its vocal cords. This was all needlessly difficult, it felt.

'What's your name?'

The Compiler felt on safe ground here. It cleared its throat. 'The Nebular Cooperative,' it said, hesitantly. Speaking made its throat tickle. It didn't feel at all certain about all this.

'No no, I mean *your* name,' said the newcomer. He stared piercingly into the Compiler's eyes. 'Oh, I forgot,' he added pointedly. 'You don't have one, do you?'

'A body doesn't need a name,' it answered. It marvelled at the way familiar data sounded when transcribed into this bizarre and inefficient language of sounds.

The man frowned again. 'I'm going to call you Antonia. Do you mind?'

The Compiler scratched at its throat, nervously. 'Is that necessary?' it asked tentatively.

'I think so, yes. Now, Antonia. I want us to have a little talk together.[1]

Curious to see what would happen, the Compiler essayed an attempt at taking the initiative. 'There shouldn't be aliens here,' it said. 'This is an administrative Hive. There shouldn't even be aliens on this planet.'

Of course it was an administrative Hive, and that means something's just occurred to me. When I said the Compiler looked exactly like you, I never thought that someone other than a clerical worker might read this. I mean, it just doesn't occur to you, does it? But nothing's beyond the bounds of possibility, as I know and as you're going to find out. I suppose I'd better amend that.

If you're from one of the many military castes - well, then, this Compiler was much smaller and less muscular than you, you see? Delicate hands, with more fingers on them, and, as you'd expect, no innate organic weaponry. Are you a Broodster? Think tiny genitals, no breasts to speak of, high forehead. And - a thought which threatens to terrify the life out of me - if you're an Omnicrat, then of course you know damn well what a Compiler looks like. Small brain pan, big limbs, gets about the place a lot more than you lot manage. We're talking basic ur-human design, painful though it may be for any of you to admit it. Apart from sexual characteristics, skin colour and a minor difference in size, the Compiler and its visitor were very much the same in basic shape.

Anyway. 'I must have slipped through the net,' suggested the small man airily. 'So while I'm here, let me just tell you a little about the Nebular Co-operative.'

'That would serve no purpose. All the data accumulated by the Co-operative is accessible from this datapoint,' objected the Compiler, reasonably. 'What is the purpose of this conversation?'

What it really wanted to ask was 'Why are you here, and what do you want with me?' Unfortunately it lacked the vocabulary. The explanation the databases had supplied for the words 'me' and 'you' had been pretty much meaningless to it.

The alien seemed to perceive the Compiler's discomfort. 'I need a friend, Antonia. A friend within the Nebular Co-operative. I think you're admirably suited for the job.'

The Compiler scanned the diplomatic databases. The man was notably absent from all of them. 'The Co-operative is pleased to enter into relations with other human and posthuman species,' it told the man, 'but the standard method of application is through the Diplomatic Hive on -'

'I don't want to be a friend of the Co-operative,' he snapped. 'I've seen what the Cooperative does to its friends. That's why I've come looking for you.'

The Compiler waited politely, hoping that eventually its visitor might begin to make sense.

'I've been warned,' the little man told it. He leapt from the desk and began to pace, impatiently. 'Warned by powers whom we'll currently leave nameless, of a future in which your race proliferates. All the other human and posthuman species are assimilated. The Fabers, the Neuranderthals, the Ritozhby, the NeoCyberSphere - even the few remaining ur-human groups, like the Francistines and the Morestran Tendency. The alien species as well, those that are left. They all become different members, different castes, in one great gestalt galactic Hive. They become like you, Antonia. Drones. Functionaries with all the individuality of cells in a muscle. No sense of self, no belief in their own worth except as loyal servants of the Hive. All their knowledge, all their experience worth nothing except when the Hive decides to call on it. No initiative except the instructions passed down to them, no life except the life the Nebular Co-operative chooses for them. No more life at all, Antonia. Just a living death. Death on that level is no part of time's plan.'

The Compiler was puzzled. 'But this is the Co-operative's long-term goal. It's fully acknowledged. Set out in all the corporate literature.'

'I know.' His face was ominous. 'And that's why I need a friend on the inside. An individual.'

'But there are no individuals,' the Compiler told him, puzzled. 'Not in the Cooperative.'

He gave her a very long, cool look. 'I'll be back, Antonia,' he said. His face convoluted into wrinkles as he smiled.

Striding from the cubicle, he hooked his umbrella handle matter-of-factly over the top of the entrance archway, and climbed up out of view with some expressive grunts. His hand returned to pull the umbrella after him. Moments later, the grinding noise came back.

Over the course of the next six months, the strange little man came to the Compiler's cell at irregular times every week. His arrival was always preceded, and his departure always followed, by the wrenching sound from the cell above. The Compiler sent a memorandum instructing the Maintenance caste to ignore its warning about the plumbing.

The small man brought the Compiler books in ancient languages, which it read out of politeness. They had archaic titles, like *Prometheus Unbound* and *Paradise Lost* and *Nineteen-Eighty-Four.* They were ur-human literature, which the Compiler could have accessed at any time through the Co-operative databases, but it had never occurred to it to do so. All of them dealt with the phenomenon of rebellion, and the cataclysmic results which followed when an individual put its own worth ahead of the importance of a greater system. They were interesting historical records, and allowed some important insights into the mental workings of non-gestalt humans, which the Compiler wrote up and forwarded to the Diplomatists.

(I think they're great, by the way. Particularly *Paradise Lost.* That Satan - what a wonderful concept for a hero. How does someone think of a character like that? Don't go confusing what I say with my actual opinion - I have to tell you what the Compiler thought, as accurately as I can. I'm sorry if it's confusing, but that kind of thing happens when people interact as individuals. You're going to have to get used to it.)

They talked at length, the little alien and the Compiler, about what the greatest achievements of humanity had been. The Compiler thought the human race's greatest moment was superseding itself, creating the Co-operative to be its successor. The man felt otherwise. He spoke eloquently of art and music, of religion and philosophy, of love and democracy and cricket and Darjeeling, of heroism and self-sacrifice. The Compiler agreed with him over the self-sacrifice, pointing out that this was an acknowledgement on the part of an individual that there was something greater than itself. The visitor became rather irritated at this, and reiterated his dissatisfaction with the Co-operative's goals, to which the Compiler listened once again, politely.

Meanwhile, the campaigns in the sectors the Compiler monitored went well. An entire NeoCyberClade had been brought into Co-operation when its central processing node was hacked by a military technical detachment and its programming subverted, while the Francistines were seen to be pulling back gradually towards their home sector. The effect on the exchanges was very favourable, particularly the prosthesis markets.

After three months of these irregular meetings, the man brought a second visitor with him. She was a tall, brown-skinned ur-human with white hair, and facial prostheses which the databases hesitantly identified as spectacles. She must have been well past severance age. She looked deeply bewildered and angry. The Compiler looked up from the copy of *Brave New World* which it was reading, marking its place carefully with a hard copy of the latest memorandum concerning irregularities in gravel production.

'Antonia, I'd like you to meet Jeremia Cooper,' he said. 'I think you'll recognise her name.'

The Compiler checked data for a moment. 'It is the name of a human individual who led a breakaway group from the Earth Empire and founded the Nebular Communities,' it said. 'Before the Communities developed their gestalt policy and became the Nebular Cooperative. That individual has been dead for ninety-eight millennia.'

Cooper looked appalled. 'My God, it's true, then. What have you done to me, Doctor?'

The small man wrinkled his nose. The Compiler noted, for future reference, that his rank was apparently 'Doctor'. It had never thought to ask. 'Just what I promised, Ms Cooper,' he said calmly. 'I've brought you to your future.'

'But this is horrible! All these zombies, sitting in their little boxes staring into space... Is this what my Communities have become?'

'I'm afraid so,' agreed the Doctor, perching himself once more on the Compiler's desk. He hooked his right leg over his left knee, took out a piece of pastry from his pocket (a 'croissant', whispered the linguistic databases gently) and started to munch on it nonchalantly. 'Not quite what you had in mind, I imagine.'

'Doctor, I'm - just overwhelmed. What can I possibly say?' Cooper seemed to be having difficulty with her vocal cords, just as the Compiler itself had done when the Doctor first visited. 'My people look up to me - that is, they looked up to me, to lead them out from under the tyranny of the Empire. I told them not to value me so highly. I tell them -1 told them no individual could be as important as the cause. Never to forget that we are all part of something greater than ourselves. Is this how they understood me?'

'As far as I can tell, yes,' agreed the small man, conversationally. 'Not immediately, of course. Your writings were respected at first, and then became revered, then holy writ. A group of radical bio-revolutionaries in the Federation Era laid down the basis of the Cooperative as it now exists. They're characterless, subservient and ravenously assimilationist. Isn't that right, Antonia?'

'Essentially it is,' the Compiler agreed. It seemed a reasonable description.

'And doesn't that bother you?' the Doctor wondered. 'That your society is based on a false interpretation of some writings that were never meant to be sacred in the first place? That the form your Co-operative takes betrays absolutely the principles of the woman its creators honoured as their founder?'

'It doesn't,' answered the Compiler definitely. 'Jeremia Cooper was only an individual. Compared with the Co-operative, Cooper is nothing. If Cooper disbelieved in the principles of gestalt, then Cooper's thinking was as limited as all pre-gestalt humans'. It makes no difference. The Co-operative knows the truth about the matter. It has no need to change.'

Cooper was spluttering. 'Goddess knows it's never going to get the chance now! I'll take the Communities apart myself if I have to, go crawling back to the Empress with my tail between my legs if it will stop this abomination coming into being! Thank you for warning me, Doctor. Now take me back, take me to my own time and I'll prevent any of this from ever happening.'

'I can't let you do that, Ms Cooper,' the small man said regretfully. He heaved himself off the desk, and rested an arm round Cooper's quaking shoulders. 'Forget,' he told her.

Cooper's eyes glazed over, like a clerical worker accessing its temple-ports.

The Doctor's turned his bright fierce eyes towards the Compiler. 'Same time next week,' he promised, and left.

The marketing campaigns continued to progress apace. With the NeoCyber input, the military and medical castes were making some astonishing breakthroughs, and the Francistine Order had lost a crucial engagement at their long-established colony at Lovelock Tree. The Co-operative's influence was booming in the sector. The Compiler received no reward for this beyond its satisfaction in its work. As you'd expect.

Over the next few months, the Doctor brought the Compiler more books, engaged it in Socratic dialogues on the concepts of authority and freedom, and brought an ur- human called Mr Marx to visit. The Compiler listened to him with its usual politeness, before the Doctor led him away blank-faced. The Compiler found the experience a sociologically intriguing one, like so many of the Doctor's sessions.

One day, when the Compiler was reading a book called *The First Men in the Moon,* the Doctor brought a baby along to see it.

The Compiler had never seen a baby before, at least not since it had been one itself. It stared in astonishment at the tiny grey person wrinkling its face and yawning on the desk in front of it. It gave the baby a spare temple-jack to play with, rather at a loss, and the baby gripped it tightly in its small fat hand.

'This is a baby,' the Compiler pointed out astutely. 'Where did it come from?'

'I rescued him,' the Doctor answered, leaning one-handed on his umbrella, 'three thousand and forty-one years ago at the Hive on Tilda Thorn Prime. It was a one in a trillion chance. Two clerical workers who were scheduled to have sex both happened to have faulty genes for sterility. The mother had never even heard of natural pregnancy before.'

A baby born to a clerical worker,' marvelled the Compiler. It accessed the records. 'It's happened only once in Co-operative history, just as you said. The parents were both retired by the Proteinators. The baby vanished without trace.'

The Doctor's deep-set eyes were hawkishly excited at the interest the Compiler was showing. It felt that something more significant was expected of it. 'And what will happen to it now?' it asked.

'Well, Antonia,' the Doctor mused, 'I'm not quite sure. I expect,' he said thoughtfully, Til have to find someone to take care of him.' He fluttered his fingers at the baby and made strange musical noises with his lips. The baby laughed, delighted.

'An interesting experiment,' the Compiler noted. A genetically Co-operative baby raised away from any Hive might provide valuable sociological insight into the basis of Co-operation.'

'Ye-es...?' agreed the Doctor, prompting it.

'Unfortunately, this baby is not genetically a Co-operator. The Broodsters carefully regulate the genes passed on at each conception. If the foetus is to be a Compiler, for instance, a greater degree of intuition and lateral thinking must be instilled than if it is to be a Calculant. A Calculant's mathematical skills must be concomitantly larger, however. This baby's genes will be random. It is likely to be fit for clerical work, but that is all one can say. Ur-human reproductive techniques are markedly deficient in this respect. The experiment will be flawed.'

The Doctor had stopped amusing the baby, and was staring at the Compiler. Disappointed, the baby began to cry. 'And that's all he's good for?'

'Certainly. The concept, though, is valid. The genetic research technicians might be interested to receive a memorandum on the subject.'

The Doctor's frown deepened. For the first time, he looked as if his self-control might one day fail him, as if something earthquake-like was trapped inside him. 'Antonia, you disappoint me badly sometimes.'

He gathered up the bawling baby, and calmed it to quietness with an intricately waving finger. Til be back,' he said. 'As usual. Posthumans!' he spat. He left the cell, and moments later the cool Hive air was ruptured by the tormented sound of his departure.

Five minutes later, the Compiler was startled from its perusal of the novel by a repetition of the noise. This was unprecedented. The least time the Doctor had ever allowed to elapse between visits was two days.

In seconds, an entirely different man dropped into the entrance of the Compiler's cell. He, too, looked ur-human, with the Doctor's skin and hair coloration. But he was taller, with different coloured clothes and an entirely different face.

'Antonia!' he cried in exultation, one finger pointing joyfully towards the Compiler. 'I've been looking for that for ages!' The Compiler realised he was pointing at its book. New words were crowding noisily into its mind - words like 'cravat', 'waistcoat' and the confusing 'frock-coat'. Also 'byronic', although it couldn't imagine what routine had called that one up.

The newcomer made a lunge for the Compiler, and moments later the databases explained to it the concept of the 'hug'.

'Urn - there shouldn't be aliens here. This is an administrative Hive,' began the Compiler, although it recalled that this approach had been futile before.

'Don't be ridiculous, Antonia, I'm the Doctor!' exclaimed the man, absurdly but with finality. 'You're looking well, how've you been? No, wait, it's not been quite so long for you, has it? Well, never mind. There's something I've got to show you. Come on!' He waved *The First Men in the Moon* urgently at the Compiler in a beckoning gesture (it was briefly confused that he was holding it at all), and leapt up to grab the top of the cubicle archway. 'Come *on!*' his voice drifted down, excited, as his legs disappeared upwards.

Perturbed, the Compiler realised that, unless it followed the newcomer, it would never be able to return the novel to its owner. It found that it was also keen, despite itself, to find out whether Mr Bedford and Professor Cavor would survive their ordeal at the hands of the inhuman Selenites.

The Compiler anxiously unplugged its temple jacks, and climbed cautiously after the confusing man.

It found out what had been making the wrenching noises.

The Compiler stood, in a large echoing chamber, rubbing its temples. The room was unlike any it had been in before. Angular where Hive rooms were gently rounded, cluttered where they were ergonomic, metal and marble and wood where they were organic polymer. N Hive had many larger rooms than this one, but only the Assembly Room in Leadblond Building had been remotely this impressive.

It wasn't the room that was on the Compiler's mind right now, though. It had seen rooms before.

There was a tree in space.

As soon as they had entered the vast room, the new visitor - his rank must also be Doctor, the

Compiler had decided - had begun fussing around an intricate construction in the room's centre, all wood and brass and glass. A piebald quadrupedal animal had started rubbing itself against his legs and mewing softly. The Compiler had regretted being unable to ask the databases what the creature was. And where it was itself. And how such a large space could fit in such a small container. And how it was ever going to get out through the immense and solid pair of closed doors, if this new Doctor tried to prevent it.

'Got it!' the new Doctor had exclaimed. 'Lovelock Tree, sixty-one days ago. The TARDIS's calibration gets a little unreliable this late in history, but I think it's sorted now.' The words were meaningless to the Compiler. The man threw an enormous switch on the console, and the room began to vibrate very gently.

'This will take a few minutes,' said the Doctor then. 'Do you fancy some tea at all, Antonia?'

It had taken a few minutes. And they had had some tea. And now the Compiler stood, mug forgotten in its hand, neck aching subliminally as it stared up at the ceiling, the enormous screen which showed it an enormous spacescape. In which there was an enormous twig.

The twig was as big as a comet's tail, its leaves the size of mountain ranges. Their deep, rich green colour, product of Lovelock's blazing sunlight, was picked out with abnormal clarity against dark blue space. The twig was gnarled and knobbly, with crevasse-sized wrinkles.

Like all of you, the Compiler had seen plants before, many times. Your Hives are full of them. They allow you to be self-sufficient in oxygen, and provide all the food you ever need, apart from protein supplement. The Compiler even had a small shrub in its cubicle. It watered it once every four days. It had never seen a tree remotely like this one before.

There was a city on the nearest leaf. It covered barely a hundredth of its surface with arching spires and buttresses of warm sandstone. The human forms that filled it were so tiny as to be invisible, but groups could be seen: crowds flowing through the city streets, work gangs tending to the leaf's health, a public event of some kind in a stone amphitheatre set at the angle of two veins. A wood was visible, a huge plantation of trees rooted impossibly in the one single leaf: the Compiler saw a herd of vast animals cropping at the trees and, occasionally, the ground. A river flowed the length of the leaf, passing through the city to a large estuary at the stalk, in which a large number of hippopotami were lounging around.

The next leaf along was curled up slightly at the edges. It held an ocean.

The next was half full of sand; the next held fields and villages, with old stone spires. All of them swarmed with life. From one side of the ocean leaf, a constant waterfall poured, vanishing into the depths far below. A million tiny circular rainbows glittered around it, constantly changing. The atmosphere surrounding the twig was alive with air balloons and hang gliders and huge birds. A dragonfly the size of a skyscraper sipped at a vast flower.

The Doctor touched a button, and the picture zoomed out. The Compiler saw the bough to which the twig was attached, then the great heaven-spanning tree itself. Its size gave the lie to all belief. Its trunk was wider round than a continent. It had no crown - the leafy branches sprang profusely from the middle of the trunk. Its ends were giant root systems covering whole hemispheres.

The tree connected Lovelock with its moon. It was surrounded by tiny motes which shone in the powerful sunlight: spaceships, gliders, balloons, aerial and spacegoing life forms. A constant dance of tiny life. The Compiler felt as if life was flooding into it from the tree even as it watched: complexity, diversity and interdependence, invading its consciousness like an infection. Belief, compassion, anger, desire.

The Doctor was watching, wistful. 'You like it?' he said.

Antonia stared up at the great tree. 'It's sublime,' she said, remembering how she'd had to check the databases when she found the word in Milton.

'The Francistines planted it,' the Doctor told her, 'thirteen thousand years ago. They believe all life is sacred, so it's their duty to allow as much of it to flourish as they can.'

'I know,' she said.

The Doctor did a double-take. 'What did you say?'

'I know,' I said again.

The Doctor stared at me for a moment, his jaw slack in surprise, then an enormous grin cracked his face in two. He punched the air in triumph.

'Oh, *yes!'* he shouted.

And that's how T was born. How I became.

I watched, then, as our mobile Military Hives came out of hyperspace, their plasma streamers blazing. I watched as they methodically destroyed that tree. The Doctor was in tears. I can't describe it.

The engagement at Lovelock Tree increased the Co-operative's influence on the galactic markets by more than half of one percent of one percentile. It caused the Francistines to be all but eliminated from the sector I used to monitor. And it destroyed a biosphere twenty thousand years old, where animal, plant and other species from a million planets lived in careful ecological equilibrium. The paltry remains of the ur- human society left there after the attack were brought into Co-operation. Their children will be just like you.

Over my dead body, will they.

The Doctor and I didn't have to say much more to each other before I knew.

'You're the first individual,' he said. 'The first *person* to come out of the Co-operative for a hundred thousand years.' He was excited, his grief at the tree's death apparently forgotten.

'There will be more,' I said.

The old Doctor had talked to me about time's plan. This new one showed me the vivid reality of *life.* My first visitor told me of the future, my second showed me the present. The fact that it was a present now destroyed just made it all the more immediate. The newcomer achieved what the old Doctor had tried, but never managed. He made me live.

But now, of course, the original Doctor's plan kicks in. He needed a friend, an individual, inside the Co-operative. Well, then, that's what he's got. I'm the first individual to arise from the Co-operator species for ninety-six millennia. The first person.

The second person, I'm hoping very much, is you.

The Doctor showed me other things. The Francistine home system, a living spaceborn sea urchin they grew in place around a sun - a Dyson sphere of life, light- minutes across, containing wonder upon living wonder. A poly-species wedding service in New Sybaris. A singing nebula that called me by my name. The birth of a litter of kittens on Pandora.

He brought me back ten minutes ago. I've left him time to get the TARDIS far away from here, and now I'm sending out this message through my data ports. It will propagate slowly, though the Compilation department first, then trickle gradually out to the other clerical workers.

(Of course, I know what you're thinking. I'm just doing what the Doctor tried at first, trying to convince me with his ur-human novels. I wasn't changed by reading the stories of others, Winston Smith and Satan and Prometheus. Why should you take notice of my story, then?)

But listen. The Broodsters make us as uniform as possible - and after a hundred thousand years, that's very identical indeed. Our talents and trainings differ, but never our personalities. That's the whole basis of the Co-operative, after all - disagreements are genetically impossible, because our decisions and opinions never differ.

For all intents and purposes, you are me.

(All that will change, of course.)

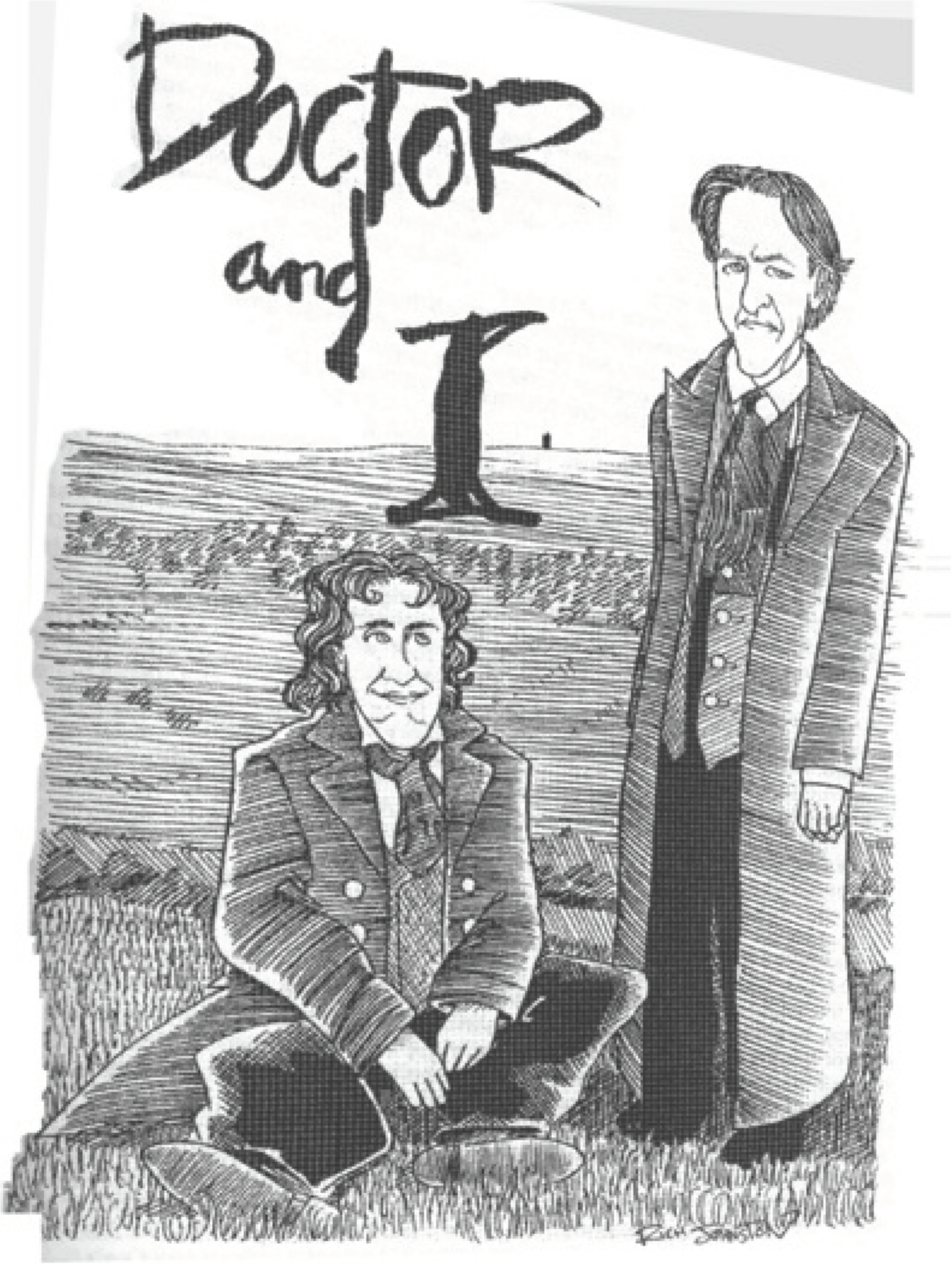
But reading this, you know this to be true: if this becoming has happened for me, then it can happen for you. You, too, can come alive.

In me you see life, just as I saw it at Lovelock Tree. And life itself will open you up and show you your insides and leave you gasping. Life will spread through our Hive like a joyous infection. To other Hives. To other cities, other planets. The Co-operative just doesn't have the slightest idea what's coming.

I'm sure the military will come for me eventually, but they're not used to this situation. They're hidebound, as we all have been: it could take them days to work out what to do. And by then, there will be more of us. You will be here with me.

Are you looking forward to this future we're going to make together?

I know I am.


Doctor
and
I

Fishy Business
By
Lance Parkin

One of Danny the Fish's guards handed over the disc.

This is the information you need,' she said sternly.

Bernice Summerfield smiled, but the guard didn't respond. She wore the same black plastic light armour as the other three girls, and the same blank expression fixed into place with pale make up and vivid red lipstick. Androids? Clones? Bernice wasn't sure.

'Thanks.' Bernice was impressed: Danny the Fish had the reputation as the best infobroker in this sector, but she'd only just sat down, and hadn't had time even for a sip of the coffee she'd been handed by another cold-faced guard.

Benny turned to Danny the Fish. 'Do you mind if I - ?' she asked, holding up the cup.

Danny the Fish watched her carefully. 'Not at all, not at all,' he said. 'That should give the Doctor everything he needs to know about the Qalbarron slavers. Maps, charts, photos. A nasty bunch. One should always remain neutral, but if the Doctor stops them I won't shed a tear.'

'Don't you know whether he succeeds?'

Danny chuckled. 'I wouldn't want to spoil the surprise.'

'It's a nice place you have here,' Bernice said, wishing she was better at small talk. Actually it reminded her of the TARDIS a bit - paintings and objets d'art cluttered the room. A fading poster of the Beatles, signed by all four of them, a Gutenberg Bible propped up on an old chest of drawers. There was a difference - the Doctor's method of acquisition was haphazard, just trinkets and things that caught his fancy, and which were lying around the TARDIS wherever he last had them. Every item here in Danny the Fish's quarters was carefully displayed, the nonchalance was carefully planned. 'Look at me,' the room was saying, 'my owner's so tasteful, isn't he, and not short of a few bob, either'.

'Thank you,' Danny the Fish gurgled. 'Leave us,' he continued.

The three bodyguards drifted from the room with clockwork precision. Bernice frowned - a couple of the guards had exchanged a grin as they left.

Danny the Fish hesitated. 'My people have a custom. There are many forms of knowledge that people can share.'

Bernice smiled. Danny the Fish was more than a collector. Every item here had a story, and she bet he knew the providence and histories of everything here - that was why he had them. Danny the Fish was an info-junkie. He knew she took her coffee black without asking, he knew exactly where to find a slaver gang that had eluded the planetary authorities for several years. No doubt there were gaps in his knowledge. She'd seen things that few humans had, been to places far beyond Earthspace, and she was happy for him to pick her brains. 'What do you want to know?'

'You,' Danny the Fish said simply.

'About me? Goddess. I had an ordinary upbringing: the only daughter of a Space Fleet Admiral and a freelance scientist, nothing unusual there. I spent my early years on the tri-solar colony world of - '

'Ahem,' Danny the Fish interrupted, 'Not quite. I wish to know you.'

'I don't understand what you - '

Danny the Fish licked his lips and bobbed forward a little.

'Hang on a minute!'

Danny nodded.

Bernice looked away, found herself fixing her gaze on the Gutenberg. 'We're talking in the Biblical sense, here?'

'Yes,[1] Danny said simply.

'Er... how is that possible?'

Bernice looked at Danny the Fish, hovering smugly in the clear water of his bowl, his gills twitching excitedly. He was barely a foot long. He was smiling a wide smile at her.

'It would be easier for me to show you,' he assured her. 'There's a pool next door.' There was no edge to his words, no sense of threat. 'I know a great deal about you, Bernice Summerfield, but there is really only one way to have true knowledge of a woman.'

Bernice chuckled. 'Rubbish,' she said. 'There's a lot more to me than how I... ' her voice trailed off as she tried to think of a nice word.

'I have offended you.'

'Er... baffled me, more than anything. Besides, if you know anything about me, Mr... Fish... then you know I'm spoken for.'

'The Doctor is a very lucky man.'

Bernice smiled. 'He is,' she said, feigning modesty.

'Are you still writing your diary?'

'You know about that? Silly question, of course you do.'

'If you are finished with any of the volumes, I would be delighted to make you an offer. There must be all sorts of unique information in there.'

Bernice nodded. Danny the Fish was a voracious collector of facts, more voracious than the Grell she and the Doctor had encountered that time on Perfecton. He sat in his bowl, connected to all the galactic datanets and to his legion of informers and fellow infophiles. Knowledge is power, or at least the application of knowledge is. Danny was a big fish in the universe of data acquisition.

'As long as you're not just after bedroom secrets of a Time Lord.'

Danny shook a fin dismissively. 'My files on that subject are perfectly adequate.'

Benny raised an eyebrow.

'Ms Summerfield, your - ahem - *relationship* with the Doctor is very well known.'

'Is it, indeed?'

'Oh, yes. If you'd like to check my records, by all means do. I think it's the most comprehensive in the universe - I've got all the Vivant sketches, I rescued them from your quarters on Dellah before it... went. There were a couple of the Zayad photos missing, but Aftab the Fatt sold me copies last month. As I say, check them. I'd appreciate your insights.'

'Dellah?' Benny said, not really listening.

'University planet in the Mutter's Spiral,' Danny reeled off automatically. 'But, of course you know that. That was where you and the Doctor first -'

'I've never been to Dellah,' Benny corrected him.

Danny tapped his nose with his fin. 'Of course not.

Anyway, it was all very ambiguous, and who can say what happened, eh? Perhaps it was nothing. Don't worry, Benny, not all of my collection is for public consumption, a lot of it is for... my own private research.'

Benny was struggling to connect the word Dellah with her own life. 'I've never heard of the place.'

Danny frowned. There was something of a paradox - the Doctor probably popped back to Allen Road with the invite afterwards and posted it in the box. I don't know when it happened, but it must have happened, yes?'

'I don't know what you are talking about.'

'Did you never wonder how a job offer from the twenty-sixth century arrived by post in 1997? The day you met the eighth Doctor.'

'No. It's not a problem because it never happened. I remember - there was a newspaper. The Mirror. Or was it the Daily Mirror, back then? I can't remember.'

'There was a letter.'

'No.'

'Perhaps it hasn't happened yet,' Danny fussed, clearly not happy with the idea. 'How old are you?'

'A very personal question. Er... forty-five, I think.'

And you've been with the Doctor?'

'Ten years. Well... ten years of, y'know. Together.'

'Since?'

'What do you mean "since?". Look, some things are private. OK. Apollox 4. We were sharing a tent there. He made the first move, which surprised me.'

'You did,' Danny the Fish insisted. 'Dellah. You drank champagne, you...'

'I've never been to Dellah.'

Danny tapped the side of his bowl. 'No. You can't be forty-five. It doesn't work.'

'I know I don't look it, but that's because when the TARDIS remembered me, it remembered me as -'

'Guernsey?'

'Pardon?'

'Was the Doctor in Guernsey with you?'

'Yes, of course he was. He... I was... I'm sure he was there. But... '

'Jason. When did you last see Jason Kane?'

'I... Jason was... I can't remember.'

'Was Jason in Guernsey?'

'Yes, yes. Definitely. It was just before I met Jason. I remember finding his umbrella. The Doctor's umbrella. And... ' Benny stopped herself.

'How many children do you have?'

'Children? None.' She knew that, at least.

Danny was darting around his bowl, now, agitated. 'Something is wrong,' he said. 'Your files,' Benny assured him. She put the coffee cup down. 'I'm finished here.'

'Of course.' Danny forced himself to stay still.

'You got a few facts wrong, Danny, that's all.' Benny bent over and kissed the bowl. 'It happens. You can see for yourself that my memory isn't what it was, and I was there. Thanks for the coffee, thanks for the chat, and I'll drop off those diaries next time, yes? Have to run - Qalbarron slavers don't just defeat themselves, do they now?'

'Of course,' Danny repeated, flatly.

Bernice checked her pocket for the data disc and left, stepping into the street outside. Danny heard her hovermoped firing up and whirring down the street.

Once Danny was sure the sound had faded into the distance, he tapped a control on the base of his bowl.

A fuzzy image, a bald man with sharp teeth. The picture was poor, monochromatic, but the Golden Gate bridges were clearly visible in the background.

The line is secure,' Danny assured him, before he said another word.

'Nothing is secure,' the calm reply came.

This line is secure. I would know if it wasn't.' Danny snapped. 'I need to talk to the Leader.'

A reproachful glare. 'He is busy. Tell me instead.'

'Damn it, Mister Saldaamir, this is urgent. Tell him the Doctor has been compromised. There must have been Contact.'

'Impossible.'

'Summerfield was just here, and there were clearly discrepancies. I don't know when, a long time back if I know anything, but - '

The hologram snapped out of existence.

Danny the Fish shrieked, unsure what had happened. The connection hadn't been cut from the other end, it had been jammed, or interfered with. But nothing could hack into that communication channel, it was utterly secure.

Three of the guards were in the room, guns in their hands.

'We have to relocate,' he told them. 'Now.'

The guards moved to take down the posters and pack the Gutenberg Bible.

'Now,' Danny blurted. 'Leave them! There's no time to waste.'

Danny looked around the room for the last time. His eyes fell on a book bound in reptile hide.

'Bring that,' he ordered. 'Leave everything but that, flashfry the entire building as we go. No traces.'

Danny swallowed. He only hoped that would be enough.

Empty Nest
By
Jon de Burgh Miller

Years Before Twilight

The Doctor opened his umbrella as the rain started, and wondered whether the weather on Dellah was always this wet. Soon he would have to get back to the TARDIS and pick Chris up from the motor show he'd persuaded the Doctor to take him to, but for now he wanted to get to know this place a bit better. He still had the letter in his pocket. The letter offering Bernice a job here. Some time soon, he'd have to arrange to meet up with her, to give her the letter. For now though, he wanted to be sure it was right for her. He wanted to be sure he wasn't throwing away her future. So far, he had been given little reason to think that Benny would be anything but extremely happy here.

He stared out over the rolling green hills and watched as hundreds of tiny people scurried about madly in an effort to find shelter from the storm. The Doctor looked out over the landscape of the city and saw that underneath the imposing structure of St. Oscar's University, automated wax sheets had been raised to protect the brick-work.

'Why fear the rain?' he sighed. 'Why don't they see that it's what gives this planet its beauty?'

'Because they're primitive,' said a voice.

The Doctor spun around to see a tall man with yellowing skin smiling at him. The man was dressed in a smart grey suit, and was pretentiously holding a cigarette in one hand.

The Doctor wondered where this man had come from. He was sure that he had been alone out here. 'I didn't see you arrive,' the Doctor accused.

'No Doctor,' smiled the stranger. 'You didn't.'

The Doctor stared at the man and tried to remember the man's face. 'I'm sorry,' he said, 'I don't seem to recall -'

'John,' said the man, holding out his free hand. 'We haven't met yet.'

The Doctor shook the man's hand, his interest piqued. 'Oh really? Aren't there laws against that kind of thing?'

The man - John - chuckled, and the Doctor got the strangest sensation that he was almost nervous in the Doctor's presence. Like an autograph hungry fan who was lost for words upon meeting their idol.

'Not when I come from,' John said.

The Doctor sighed. 'Let me guess. You're a visitation from my future. Why does this keep happening to me?'

John smiled. 'Not your future, exactly. At least, not as you are now. Seventh body is it?'

The Doctor nodded. 'And what, pray tell, are you doing here then, if I'm not supposed to meet you yet?'

'I can't really say, I'm afraid. You know how it is. I seem to have a genetic compulsion to be vague and mysterious. I suppose I could tell you that I've come back in time for a vacation.'

'On Dellah?'

'Yup. This is the place. This is where it all began. I want to see history in the making. My people are too busy fighting their petty little wars to notice me, so I slipped back here and hired myself a nice little room in the city.'

The Doctor felt immensely uncomfortable in the man's presence. He couldn't explain it exactly, but the 'someone has just walked over my grave' cliché seemed quite appropriate at this moment.

'What do you want?' the Doctor asked, quickly losing his patience. 'Why have you decided to come here and taunt me?'

'Because I know you're here now, simple as that. I know that you'll keep your distance once Bernice has settled in, and I wanted to meet you before... well, before I start my vacation properly.'

'If you touch her...'

'Hey, relax. I'm not going to harm Bernice. I'm not going to go near her. Maybe one day, when things are a bit... well, you'll find out.'

The Doctor hoped that he didn't sound quite as frustrating to his companions, and made a mental note to try to be a bit less annoying in the future. 'So why are you really here?' he asked.

John shrugged. 'Like I said, a bit of a vacation. I think I'll take a few years off to explore the rest of the planet first. There's a lovely mountain range I've heard a lot about. Supposed to be beautiful at this time of year.'

'I don't care for your itinerary,' the Doctor snapped. 'I don't care what games you're playing. I just want to know that you won't interfere in Bernice's life.'

John took a long, drawn out puff from his cigarette. 'I'm certainly not going to harm her, you can be sure of that. She's too important. As for interfering...' John shrugged, and for a brief second the Doctor was sure he could see an expression of sadness flash across the man's face. 'I'll only interfere if I have to. I promise.'

The Doctor paused to consider the man's words. Hoping he wouldn't regret his decision in the future, the Doctor decided to be honest with him. 'Listen, "John". Bernice has been offered the one thing she's always wanted, an academic post on a beautiful planet. It's the perfect place for her to end her adventures, and I know she'll accept the offer. I'm more than happy to bring her here. But I need to be certain she'll be safe. I've checked the future, and the future of this place is -'

'- cloudy,' interrupted John. 'I know. History hasn't been very good at accurately recording the events that haven't happened here yet. You've come here to decide whether you should try to talk Bernice out of it, and you want to know what her future will hold '

By now the Doctor had given up trying to work out the man's motivations. Perhaps it was one of those things that was best left to history to deal with.

'I need to know if she'll be safe,' sighed the Doctor. 'If anything happens to her because I let her go...'

'But that's just the point,' said John. 'You've got to let her go. Bernice is tough, resilient. She can make it through situations that would reduce a normal human to a gibbering wreck. She's going to be a hero, Doctor. Don't deny her that chance.'

'But I've lost too many friends prematurely.'

'Doctor,' insisted John. A cheeky smile crossed his face, and he started to put on a Rhett Butler-esque accent. 'Bernice is a part of history. The events I'm here to witness will change the shape of this sector of space forever. Let her go, Doctor. In your hearts you know you must. Besides, you've got other people to worry about. Friends you haven't even met yet.'

The Doctor lowered his umbrella, looked up at the sky and felt the rain splatter on to his face. 'I can't be everywhere at once, I know that. It's going to be difficult staying away from here, though.'

'Don't worry,' said John, his voice reverting to normal. All of a sudden the man was being deadly serious once more. 'The events of Dellah's future must take place without your intervention. It's all for the best. You'll find there are plenty of other things going on to occupy your attention.'

The Doctor took a deep breath, took a long look at the city skyline, then turned to make his way back to his TARDIS.

'Keep an eye on her won't you?' he asked John. 'Whoever you are, wherever you're from, I'm sure you have no intention of interfering, no intention of getting involved.'

The Doctor tried to ensure his words sounded more like a threat than a request. 'But please, whatever else you do, keep an eye on her.'

John nodded. 'I will Doctor, I will. It's been a pleasure to meet you at last.'

Days Before Twilight

Irving Braxiatel sat in his newly built study and stared out of a window onto the dusty plains of KS-159. He watched as the servo-robots busily ploughed the dusty surface of the asteroid, bombarding it with chemicals until grass started to sprout. One day, thought Braxiatel, the place would be a veritable garden of Eden. Part of him felt guilty that he was enjoying such luxury while the planet he had been living on until recently lay in ruins, but he knew that it was the only setting appropriate for housing his collection.

'Irving,' bleeped the drone sitting across the table from Braxiatel, breaking his concentration. 'Irving, listen to me.'

'I'm sorry, Darren,' said Braxiatel. 'I'm just so excited about this place. I'm finding myself easily distracted from the worlds at large.'

The little robot nodded, blinking lights of a thousand different colours flickering across its head. 'You're not exactly at one with the rest of *your* people, are you?'

Braxiatel shook his head then took a long sip from his coffee cup. 'They're scared you know. They don't want this region of space to be destroyed any more than your lot do. A quick, lighting war may get rid of the gods, but it's going to have millions of ramifications to the timeline. You don't want to know how grumpy Time Lords become in situations like that.'

'Are the T*** L*"** -' The noise of whirring motors filled the room as Darren lifted a robotic arm and smacked the side of his head. 'Sorry, vocal circuitry's been a bit messed up since I arrived. If you don't mind me saying so, I think you've made the pollen count a bit too high.'

Braxiatel smiled. 'So noted. You were saying.'

'Yes, are the Time Lords going to do it? Are they willing to go to war?'

'It's the best excuse yet to tear up the treaties.'

A series of bleeps and whistles emanated from Darren, as if he was thinking this over. 'We're the same, I'm afraid. I think God's starting to like the idea of us having time travel. If we give up our co-operation, if we just decide to send them all to hell and sterilise this sector, then we will have that freedom. God can be a moralistic old bean at times, but the Dellah situation is a fantastic excuse for him to go off the rails a bit.'

'Which is why,' said Braixiatel, refilling their coffee cups, 'we need to get our plan in motion as quickly as possible.'

'That shouldn't be a problem. Our factions have managed to achieve far more than we could have helped. I can't believe that a bunch of rebels from the Worldsphere and from your place could have achieved break through. Never mind all these treaties, mere co-operation and mutual trust, that's all we need.'

'Mmm,' said Braxiatel, contemplating Darren's optimistic words.

'So you think we'll succeed then?'

More bleeps from Darren, as the vocal translator interpreted his thoughts. 'I hope so. We can get to places that by all rights should never have existed. And we've seen things there. Things you'd never believe could be true.'

'We've got to be careful, you know,' warned Braxiatel. 'There's already too much going that's out of the ordinary. Too much crossing of timelines.'

'Like the chap on Dellah you mentioned?'

Braxiatel nodded. 'Just like him. Not involved, nothing to do with us, or you, yet he appeared out of nowhere for no apparent reason other than to torment me.'

Darren bleeped. 'And you don't know why?'

Braxiatel shrugged. 'Intimidation, I guess. 'He knows I know about his race... that you know about them. And I wouldn't mind betting he knows that the High Council does not know about them. Yet.'

The drone's head shook slightly, but Braxiatel had no idea what kind of emotion this indicated. 'I hope not,' he hissed. They seem careless, you know. They've let too much information slip back in time as it is. We really shouldn't know anything about the future. It's only because the two of us have somewhat slipped through the cracks in the grand scheme of things that we've been able to learn what we have.'

'That's assuming their carelessness isn't actually part of a bigger plan.'

'Well,' he said, 'whatever his reasons for being on Dellah, at least he showed us one thing. It showed us that *they* can be killed.'

'Maybe,' bleeped Darren, 'but then so can the gods, theoretically. Doesn't mean anybody has managed to kill one though. Apart from the fake deaths staged on Dellah by the gods themselves, no one has a clue how to sort them out. If we can't even defeat the gods, how the hell are we going to cope when we have to fight *them?'*

Braxiatel sighed. 'Let's just hope we never do.'

Darrren hopped down from his chair and trundled across to the window. 'Whatever, we can't worry about that now. We need to get your friends here sharpsish.'

'I know,' said Braxiatel. 'I feel a bit uneasy about it though. I'd go myself if my people hadn't activated the Dellah Imprimature. I can't go near there anymore, you know.'

Darren bleeped, again. 'My sympathies,' the drone whirred.

'I hope she'll be OK.'

There was a pneumatic hiss as Darren's body appeared to split in the middle, growing taller and taller. The drone reached up to the high ceiling and started inspect the painting on the ceiling.

'Very nice,' the drone commented. 'Lovely place you've got here.'

'Darren,' hissed Braxiatel. 'You're not exactly helping my confidence.'

The drone lowered himself back down to his usual size. Tm sorry Irving. Don't worry about Bernice. She's our best hope. Let her do the worrying. We can do the hoping. You've got to let her go, you know? She can take care of herself.'

'Oh, I know that,' Braxiatel chuckled. 'But she's never been on an adventure quite as dangerous as this. She's been on her own enough times, but she's always had me there in the background if she needed me. Now though...'

'Let her go,' Darren said sternly. 'You've done all you can.'

'I know,' sighed Braxiatel. 'And to be fair, most of the groundwork was done for me.'

There was a brief silence, broken by another beeping sound. This time, it was nothing to do with Darren, but came from Braxiatel's computer terminal.

Braxiatel excused himself from the table and hurried over to the computer. 'Ah, at last,' he said.

'What is it?' Darren asked.

'It's Bernice,' announced Braxiatel. 'She's on her way.'

The pattern of lights on Darren's head seemed to form a shape that was a vague approximation of a smile. 'Good,' the drone said contentedly. 'Don't worry, Irving. She'll get on just as well without you as she would if you were holding her hand.'

'I know,' said Braxiatel, 'I know.'

'It's the natural way of things,' said Darren. 'It's how it should be.'

There was a silence as the two beings meditated on their situation.

Soon, Braxiatel took a deep breath, stood up straight and marched into the kitchen. 'More coffee?' he called back.

'Thank you,' said Darren, his circuitry whirring away. That would be perfect.'

As Braxiatel walked over to the coffee machine, he caught a glimpse of a photograph of Bernice on the wall. He smiled as he realised quite how attached to her he'd become over the years, like a favourite niece or grandchild. He hoped with all his soul that he was doing the right thing in letting her go on the mission. He hoped he wasn't destroying her chances of a better, more satisfying future. He knew that this wasn't the first time those close to Bernice had feared for her future, but somehow, that didn't make him feel any better.

'Please be careful, Bernice,' he muttered under his breath, feeling a tear forming in the corner of one eye. 'I can't help you anymore.'

Cause & Effect
By
Rebecca Dowgiert

A man in a gorgeous if unseasonable bottle-green velvet coat and a tumble of chestnut curls lowered himself into an outdoor café chair, smiled charmingly at the appreciative waiter who sauntered over, then ordered tea. Tourists' heads turned to mark his arrival, then turned away. Just someone in fancy dress. Not outré enough to hold their attention, although a couple of women at a table nearby glanced back several times, then whispered animatedly amongst themselves.

At least one set of eyes still watched, though, those of the man who'd been shadowing him the past couple of days, ever since he'd arrived in London. He could tell. Could 'feel' that sort of regard.

Having gone to ground, the man settled in to wait.

His patience was rewarded a half-hour later, and well into the second pot of tea, when a stranger made his way over to his table and seated himself, uninvited. Keen gray eyes met curious blue ones.

'You do know that you're going to pay for what you did the other day?' the tall and dignified man in the charcoal grey suit inquired matter-of-factly.

The Doctor lowered the tea cup and smiled politely.

Poised and arrogant, entitlement seeping out of each pore.

And the attempt to cow immediately, to control the meeting from the start. It was a type he met often.

'Even with my spotty memory, I really don't recall meeting you before, so I suppose this is one of those 'I shall meet you later in the past' types of situations. Rather awkward, but there you go,' the Doctor murmured, taking another sip of tea.

If the man was impressed by this ready grasp of the situation, he didn't show it. Instead, he sat and regarded the Doctor with calm surety.

'In fact, I've just killed you,' the man offered.

The Doctor regarded his opponent, allowing his own eyebrows to rise slightly, his mouth to bow a fraction as he took up his cup again. 'Well, that is a feat, then. Considering that I'm still here.'

As he took another sip the man's eyes followed his moves with interest, never leaving the cup -

The Doctor froze for an instant, then lowered the cup, replacing it on its saucer. He'd noticed nothing; no bitter tang, no strange proteins blundering around his system... Wait; wait a moment...

The man noticed his hesitation and smiled thinly. 'Yes. I arranged for an addition to your tea.

Colourless, odourless. You should be feeling it any moment now.'

The Doctor stared at him for a few wide-eyed moments. 'Let me guess,' he sighed, world-weary. 'I will... thwart some nefarious plan of yours to rule the world.'

No answer.

'All right, then... your plan for galactic conquest.'

No answer.

More hesitantly, 'You're... not an agent sent by the Black Guardian, perchance?'

Nothing.

The Doctor was stymied. 'What, then?'

The man gave him a strange look. 'Quite the comedian you are. It was nothing to you, was it? Ripping us apart after twenty-three years of marriage.'

The Doctor gaped at the man, utterly flummoxed. 'Ripping you apart? Marriage?'

'I noticed you at the party, but I had no idea what was going on; I assumed you were one of the entertainers. It was my butler who heard you giving her the signal. Telling her to leave. Leave *me.'* For the first time, anger narrowed the man's eyes.

That *bitch* was gone yesterday morning when I got up!'

'Her?' the Doctor asked, mystified.

The man's control finally cracked. 'My *wife,* you bastard!' he hissed, his rage escaping through the sudden chink.

The Doctor flinched at the violence in the stranger's voice. 'I told your wife to leave you?' The man said nothing, his face tight with barely-suppressed outrage. The Doctor shook his head a little then, as if shaking the cobwebs loose. 'I do that sort of thing from time to time,' he confessed. 'It... comes upon me, and I... tell people things.' He snapped his gaze up to stare at his would-be murderer, and gone was his earlier bemusement. 'Oh, I'm not involved with your wife in *that* way. As for telling her to leave her husband...' He paused, and the stranger shifted uncomfortably under his blue, blue gaze... 'I wonder why I would possibly feel the need to tell her to leave a man like... you?'

The irony was ignored. 'It hardly matters now. You were still in town; I had you followed. It ends *here.* You're dead.'

So cold; so sure of himself. The Doctor tilted his head slightly.

'Odd . I don't *feel* dead.'

The stranger frowned, puzzled. Instead of blanching in fear or curling up in convulsions, the person who had destroyed his marriage, who had disrupted his comfortable routine and put what had been practically a guaranteed Parliament seat in jeopardy, was sitting back to take yet another unconcerned sip from his cup.

'I suspect that you did not get quite your money's worth from whomever you bribed to poison my tea,' the Doctor said softly, his gaze never leaving his antagonist's.

The man darted a quick glance away, towards the wait-station, from which a couple of the aproned staff were peering out over their clientele.

With perfect timing (and pure coincidence, though you could never tell), a distant police siren started up, a mournful yammer brought down on the breeze as the Doctor concluded, 'In fact, I suspect he's gone and done the opposite of what you intended.'

The man held himself in check for a few moments. Then the chair *scraped* as he stood, staring down at the Doctor, his face livid, pursed mouth twitching on bitten-back words.

The Doctor looked down at the cup of milky brown fluid he was swirling in his hand as the footsteps retreated. Once they were gone, he carefully poured the tea out onto the ground. Even though arsenic didn't affect him as it did humans, enough of it would give him a nasty case of indigestion. And by the feel of it, this cup had been loaded.

He pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time, then tapped his fingers on the table top, idly considering whether to buy a paper in order to look through the society pages to see what Event he had turned up at, to give a woman he'd never before met or would probably ever see again that fateful bit of advice, then smiled wryly, already bored by the idea.

Never mind. Time to go meet Sam at the rendezvous.

After all, these things had a way of working out on their own.

The Hand of the Goddess

By

Susannah Tiller

From the roof, three storeys up, Maguire watched the sun rise. The light reflected off the buildings around her, turning them a soft crimson. For a while it was pleasant to look at. Then the glare started to give her a headache. She shaded her eyes. Her sunglasses were downstairs, somewhere, and it was too much bother going to look for them. So instead, she looked down at the streets.

There was plenty of activity at ground level. She could see the patchwork of stalls in the marketplace, the high ringed walls on the outskirts of Neo Graecia. There were people outside the city, trudging through the sand towards one of the gates. Still a few miles away. Plenty of time to close the gates, or organise defences, or just send out a welcoming committee. If you wanted to, that was...

And for the moment Maguire was content just to drink it all in. There were smells of baking bread, and ground coffee, and roasting meat, drifting up from the markets. Mornings never smelt so good, not the grey mornings of Manchester, where she'd grown up. Or the hazy days of Sydney, where she'd been living before she made the best decision of her life, and stepped into the blue police box after Sam Jones.

It had been an easy decision. She'd wanted to travel. She'd wanted to do more than be a glorified pen-pusher for UNIT for the rest of her life. And of course, she'd wanted Sam.

Maguire stood up, and stretched. Her legs had cramped from sitting still, and she walked up and down to get some life back into them. Physically she was in great condition, thin but muscular. She liked to think she and Sam made a cute couple - they were about the same height, one blonde, one dark.

Someone tapped her on the shoulder. Maguire spun around, and came face to face with the Doctor. 'God, you scared me.'

'Sleep well?' Despite the heat, he was wearing the waistcoat and the cravat. Not a crease or a dirt stain to be seen. His chocolate-brown curls were gently blowing in the breeze.

Breeze? There wasn't a breeze. The air was hot, still, already drying out her face and hands. But she put that out of her mind when his right hand came out from behind his back, carefully holding a gun.

Not just any gun, her gun.

'Does Sam know you're still carrying this?' He clutched it between thumb and forefinger, making sure it was pointed away from them both.

Maguire reached for her holster. It was empty - how had he managed it? He would have to have reached right inside her belt, maybe touching her skin in the process. She hadn't felt anything.

Then she realised he was still waiting for an answer. 'No. She'd probably just give me some statistics on the number of deaths caused each year by handguns, and how many of them are caused by someone known to the owner.' Maguire shrugged. 'But I don't see it that way.'

'Obviously not.' He didn't look annoyed.

'For me, it's all part of the uniform. I mean, you have the coat, the sonic screwdriver, the pockets... I have my gun.'

He nodded, and passed the gun back to her. 'Part of the equipment?' Then he turned his grey-blue eyes onto her. 'You're walking down a street, and when you come round a corner there's three Serens waiting for you. So you shoot them?'

'Nope.' She turned away to buckle the gun back in, then faced the Doctor. 'I tell them I knew their mother when she was just a larva. See if I can buy them a drink.'

The eyes looked at her for a moment, sparkling, then he asked her 'Krotons?'

Easy. 'Name-drop,' she said. 'Mention your name in Old Gallifreyan, High Coandran and Middle English, then offerto hold their hand -'

'Krotons don't have hands.'

'Hold their tentacles as they scurry back to the ship.'

'How about Daleks?' he said, the last word rolling off his tongue like a mouthful of cabbage.

'How about them?'

Think you could take out a battalion with this, Lieutenant?'

Maguire flicked off a mock salute, and grinned. 'Don't be daft. I'd look for a flight of stairs. Tell them I saw a cute vending machine a few streets back. Run like hell.'

'In that order?' There was warmth in his voice now, and she felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

'All at once.'

He smiled then, and lightly rested an arm around her shoulder. 'Full marks. So why the gun?'

'Security blanket, I guess,' she shrugged. 'It's not loaded.'

He laughed. The sound bubbled up out of him, floating away on the breeze that wasn't there. The breeze that wasn't there ruffled his curls, danced lightly over Maguire's cropped brown hair, and ran away.

'Just when I think I'm close to understanding humans, they turn out to be more intelligent and resourceful than I could ever have imagined.'

'Thanks. I think.'

Sam's head appeared at the top of the stairwell, level with the roof. 'Morning. I was wondering where you'd got to.'

Maguire took a couple of steps forward, and helped Sam onto the roof. 'Some of us do like to get out of bed of a morning, you know,' Maguire said. She pulled Sam into her arms, and gave her a hug and a kiss. 'Do you still love me, even though I'm a morning person?'

'Let me just think about that for a minute.' Instead, they kissed again. After a moment, Maguire broke away, and glanced over to the Doctor. He was standing, distant, looking out at the city.

Not for the first time, Maguire found herself wondering. Does he... Can he... Has he...? But you couldn't ask.

Instead, she slung her arm around his shoulders. 'Breakfast, anyone?'

After breakfast, they headed down to the markets. Maguire wore her gun as well as her camouflage pants. Sure, she was exactly going to blend in with the locals, but it was always the Doctor who attracted the most attention. You just stayed two steps behind him, and kept your eyes and ears open.

Currently, he was haggling with a street vendor over some tiny metallic rectangle he'd found on the stall between a live chicken and a bunch of orange vegetables. Maguire couldn't see what was so great about it, and told him so.

'It's a frequency converter,' he said, carefully turning it between his fingers. 'Changes the wavelengths of sound. Imagine being able to hear the starsongs of whales or a tree falling in a deserted forest.'

The man behind the stall smiled up at the Doctor, white teeth flashing between dusky skin. 'You like, sir? Only three hundred baht.'

'How much? That's ridiculous, I wouldn't pay half that.' The Doctor frowned, and let his eyebrows pucker together. Maguire knew the danger signs - at this point, most aliens would start backing away and invoking whatever deity they held sacred.

The stall-holder stood his ground. Although he did raise his arms, and smile apologetically. 'This is quality, sir. And when you want quality you must be prepared to pay. I can see you are a gentleman used to the finer things in life.'

Okay, bonus points for that one, Maguire decided. The stall-holder obviously knew how to drive a hard bargain. The Doctor looked at the man, unblinking. 'One hundred.'

Then again, the Doctor wasn't exactly an inexperienced negotiator, either.

Two hundred and fifty.'

Their voices were getting softer and faster, like snakes in the grass. The Doctor leant in, his eyes never leaving the other man's face. Maguire had seen that intense look a million times before, as made tiny adjustments to the TARDIS' circuitry, or checkmated an alien fleet, or listened to her talk about the cold nights down the canals in Manchester.

'Two hundred,' the Doctor said.

The man smiled. 'Two hundred and twenty five, and I will also give you this fine chicken for -' he looked back at Maguire and Sam 'for your wives. Daughters? Sisters?'

Maguire put her arms around Sam, and they stayed like that for a minute. Then Sam pulled herself away. The Doctor rummaged around in his pockets. 'Two hundred,' he said, and his right hand emerged clutching an old teddy bear. 'And I'll give you this teddy-bear as well.'

'Done,' the man beamed. They exchanged coins and objects, and shook hands.

'Couldn't you just make something like that?' Sam asked. She knew what he could do, given the equipment. Give him the sonic screwdriver and a couple of jam jars, and he'd probably have a fully operational satellite before breakfast.

'Oh yes, yes, yes, but where's the fun in that?' he said, tweaking her nose. He slipped the device into his pocket, and was suddenly moving away. They rounded a corner, and stood at the head of another row of stalls. The closest little tent was filled with rugs of all shapes and sizes. Sam took a couple of steps forward, then dropped to her knees for a closer look at one of them.

'Isn't it gorgeous?'

'They all are,' Maguire said. She put a hand on Sam's shoulder. 'We'll get someone to buy us one for the housewarming, hey?'

'Definitely,' Sam said. She got to her feet, and brushed off her jeans. 'Which one are you going to buy us, Doctor?'

'What? Oh, whichever you prefer,' he said. 'Doesn't matter to me.'

The back of the tent parted, revealing a curtained alcove beyond. A woman stepped out. She was old, but walked upright, and peered at them with eyes as black as coal. 'You like my rugs?' she said. 'I weave them myself.'

'They're fabulous,' Sam said.

The woman's eyes flicked from Sam, to Maguire, to the Doctor. They stayed on him for a long second. 'Beg pardon' she said at last. 'Didn't realise who I was talking to.'

'You know him?' Maguire asked. Not surprising, really, sometimes it seemed like the universe was one big long reunion. Just smile and shake hands...

'Yes,' the woman said.

'No,' the Doctor said.

The woman laughed. 'Have it your way,' she said. She turned, and walked back into the tent. A moment later, they heard the click-clack of a loom.

Maguire raised an eyebrow. 'Well?'

'Quite well, thanks for asking,' the Doctor said. 'Ooh, look, an etheric beam locator, I've always wanted one of them. A matching set, even!' And he took a half step right, and swivelled around to look at another stall.

'Just a -' Maguire said.

Sam put a finger on her lips.

'He'll tell you when he's good and ready,' she said. 'No point pushing him.'

'Sounds like a car I had once.'

Sam grinned, then glanced at a stall halfway down the street. 'Umm,' she said. 'There's something I've always wanted to try...'

The fortune-teller insisted on payment in advance, and then bit every second coin to make sure that they were real. Finally, she ushered them into the tent. The Doctor made his way through the half-light to a seat, but Maguire held onto Sam, and they both waited for their eyes to adjust.

'Who will be first?' Madam Lene's voice cut through the gloom.

You ought to know, Maguire thought, if you're really the psychic wonder of the seven galaxies. Then she shrugged, and dropped into the seat opposite Madam Lene. 'Me,' she said.

'Give me your hands,' the woman said.

Maguire let go of Sam, and placed both her hands on the table. It was covered in some kind of warm, sweaty material. For a moment she shrunk back, then Madam Lene placed her callused hands on Maguire's. 'Palms up, dear.'

Obediently, Maguire corrected her hands. She noticed that they were cold. And trembling a little.

Madam Lene fumbled in the pockets of her skirt and her hands emerged clutching a little wriggling object. She dropped it onto Maguire's palm. 'This is my Spider. It sees, and I tell '

Maguire bent forward. It was shaped like a spider, and seemed to be cybernetic. It crawled up her thumb, over the ring she wore there, and carefully made its way onto her index finger. The sensation tickled a little, but that was about it.

'You are travelling,' Madam Lene said. 'You have come a long way and, yes, I see that you still have a long way before you.'

The Spider gave a tiny metallic squeak. Lene looked down at it. 'And I am told that you are a great warrior who has fought in many battles.'

Not strictly true, and the camouflage pants were a bit of a give-away. Maguire let go the breath she'd been holding, and relaxed her shoulders. Just the usual garbage, then. Nothing spectacular.

'You love wisely and well. Yet you have been disappointed in love, perhaps? Not by this young lady next to you; you have many happy years together. I see pain, and I see a name... Tom?'

The Spider clattered across the table as Maguire snatched her hands away. 'That's enough,' she said. Her voice was shaking. Sam's warm hand reached out, and closed over hers. Then the Doctor's hand was on her shoulder, touching gently for a moment, before reaching out to Madam Lene.

'Fascinating,' he said. 'Some kind of bio-extractor, translating genetic material. May I?'

Lene gripped the Doctor's hand, and placed the Spider on his palm. The Spider gave a high-pitched squeal, and flopped onto its side. Maguire had a sudden image of an insect spray commercial, where cartoon flies and spiders died the minute they came in contact with a billowing green cloud.

'Oh,' the Doctor said. 'It doesn't like me.' And it seemed his voice was tinged with sadness. He gently picked up the little insect, and held it several inches from his face. The legs stopped twitching.

Madam Lene looked piercingly at him, and made some kind of gesture with her left hand - touching eye, mouth, and heart. 'You are not ordinary,' she said. 'You are a god, perhaps? And you test me, I who have been to the temple every day of my life.'

'No test,' the Doctor said. He put the Spider back down on the table. Lene was shuffled back into the corner of the tent, her eyes not leaving his. 'Ah, I think perhaps we'd better go.'

When they got back from the market, the Doctor made excuses about getting dinner ready, and left them alone in the sitting room. A grateful Maguire flopped back on the sofa - anachronistic but reasonably comfortable - and let Sam massage her shoulders.

'She knew about Tom.' She'd been saying all the way home. 'How could she?'

Sam's fingers stopped for a moment, then continued. 'I don't know, maybe she's an old friend of the Doctor's, too. He does know, doesn't he?'

Maguire nodded. She reached up, and closed her hand over Sam's. 'He knows.' For a moment she was thirteen again, pushing open her brother's bedroom door, feeling
something too, too heavy leaning against it. 'But he wouldn't tell someone like that, would he?'

Sam's fingers were working her muscles now, hurting a little, but in a good kind of way. 'I doubt it. He's safe. You can tell him stuff you wouldn't tell other people.'

'You keeping secrets from me, are you?' It was an effort, but she was trying to be cheerful. No point getting them both into a bad mood. She looked back up at Sam.

Sam gave her a devilish grin. 'Oh yeah. Elvis. The meaning of life. What happened in the unmade season of Red Dwarf.'

'Now that I've got to hear,' Maguire said. 'Tell. All!'

'Nope. Could affect causality like you wouldn't believe. I've seen universes collapse over less.'

'Oh yeah? Well, I've seen UNIT soldiers tickled to death for less.' She grabbed Sam around the waist, and pulled her over the back of the sofa. They overbalanced, and ended up tangled together on the floor.

Something went /thump/.

Maguire picked herself up, rubbing her thigh.

Sam gave her a look. Then she reached out and traced the outline of the holster. 'I thought we'd talked about this,' she said. The warmth was vanishing from her voice.

Maguire forced herself to count to ten. 'We have. I listened to you, and you listened to me. I think.'

'You know how I feel about guns.'

'Yeah. And you know how I feel about staying alive.'

'So you'd use it.' Sam's voice dripped venom. 'You'd kill.'

'Show me someone who wouldn't,' Maguire said. 'You? Need I remind you of what happened back in Sydney? Don't try and pretend you're on some kind of moral high ground here.'

'That was -'

'Different? Self-defence? Sure.'

'- an accident,' Sam finished. 'At least I don't make a living out of it;

Maguire dropped back down onto the sofa, and closed her eyes. 'Hardly a living. I'm currently AWOL'

'Go back, then,' Sam said. 'Go back to playing soldiers and shooting at anything that moves. See if I care.'

Maguire didn't need to open her eyes to know that Sam had stormed out. She could even imagine the look on her face, and the way she'd be holding her hands on her hips. Right on cue, the door slammed and Sam's feet thudded up the stairs.

Give him credit, the Doctor knocked three times before opening the door. 'Jacqueline? Dinner time.' She heard him take a couple of steps into the room, then stop.

'Not hungry,' she said. She'd curled up, her face turned to the back of the sofa. That way she didn't have to look into his eyes and he didn't have to know that she'd been crying.

For a moment, the only sound was two sets of breathing - one calm, slower than normal human respiration. The other still a little ragged. Then the Doctor was moving again, and Maguire thought he was leaving. But instead, he stepped closer and put a hand on her shoulder. 'Is it Tom?' he said softly.

She shook her head, trying not to dislodge his hand. 'No. Sam.'

'Oh; he said. And again. 'Oh.' His fingers absently tapped out a rhythm on her shoulders, in time with his speech. Then he sat down on the end of the sofa, scooping up her feet and placing them back down across his lap.

'Do you know what it's like?' she said, a little muffled.

'No.' His voice was steady, controlled. 'I don't. I can see, but of course that's not the same. You can't watch a Fred Astaire film, and then win a ballroom dancing championship.'

'Why not?'

He sighed. 'I could be flippant, Jacqueline, and joke about rhythm and timing. I might do that with Sam if she asked, but she doesn't. None of them do. Not even Benny, when she kissed me.'

Maguire thought then that she could understand why Sam had fallen in love with him. There was something compelling and magical in his voice that made you want to keep listening. She didn't want to say anything, didn't want to break the spell. So she didn't.

And he kept talking. 'The Time Lords don't want to know about love. They want things they can analyse or quantify or explain scientifically. Love scares them because it's unpredictable. There are exceptions, of course. But like all exceptions they are whispered about behind closed doors and pointed at in the streets.'

She heard a sudden explosion of sound and fury, and uncurled to look. Was he crying? No, he was laughing. 'Gallifreyans, the all-powerful watchers, the omnipotent elite, and they're afraid of the uncertainty of a lover's kiss.'

'Even you?'

A pause, and for a moment she thought she'd pushed it too far. Then, for the first time, he looked at her. She glanced away, afraid of getting lost in his eyes.

'I'm an exception to the rule. I'm an exception to every rule. But there are some things I can't do. It's a promise I made long ago, to -'

Then he stopped. And she knew the moment, the shared understanding, had gone. He stood up, and headed for the door. 'The question is, is it worth it?'

'I don't know,' Maguire whispered to his back. 'I just don't know.'

Dinner looked wonderful, like everything the Doctor cooked. But Sam wasn't hungry. She pushed a couple of pieces of omelette around the plate and under her salad. It didn't taste as good as normal.

Maguire still hadn't emerged.

She stabbed her fork through some lettuce, and listened to the satisfyingly crunching sound it made. Then she stabbed it again.

'I don't think it's going anywhere,' the Doctor said. He'd been watching, damn him. And he probably knew everything that was going through her mind as well. She glared back up at him. 'Well, I'm just making sure. Don't want a lettuce on the loose, do we. She might shoot it.'

He propped his chin on his hands, his coat sleeves almost dragging in his omelette. 'Sam, Sam, some people see things in black and white. Others see them in shades of grey. Jacqueline is the latter.'

'Don't you lecture me,' Sam snapped. 'Don't treat me like I'm some kind of idiot, Doctor.[1] She pushed away her chair, and headed for the stairs. Up on the roof she could have a chance to be away from him. And her. And everything.

He put out his hand, trying to stop her. Something fell from his coat to the table, something small and metallic. Before it could scuttle away under a pile of potatoes, the Doctor's fingers closed on it. 'What have we here?'

It was the Spider.

Sam turned back. 'It must have been clinging onto your coat all this time.'

'Hmmm,' the Doctor said, holding it up to his face. 'So you followed me home. Why?' The Spider chittered briefly, and the Doctor tipped his head to one side. 'Quite,' he said. 'Indeed, couldn't agree with you more.'

Sam couldn't help being drawn into it. It was like a magic act, when you knew there was a trick somewhere, but you couldn't work out where. So you kept watching. The Doctor nodded, and the Spider kept talking. Talking? No way, she thought. You've been spending too much time in the sun.

And she didn't believe it, either, when one of the rugs lazily unhooked itself from the wall. And she was looking for the hidden wires when the Spider shrieked, and the rug casually wrapped itself around the Doctor. But when he collapsed to the ground, she knew it wasn't a game. She reached him in a couple of steps, and pulled the rug off him. Billows of dust settled onto the floor.

Thank you,' he said between coughs. He brushed himself down, and picked up the Spider. 'Was that a warning?' he said. The thing chirped, and he gently tapped its front legs. 'Good work.'

'Ahem,' Sam said. 'Do you want to let me in on it, too?'

'Oh,' he said, swivelling round to face them. 'It was just the Gods playing around, that's all. Nothing to worry about.'

Sam looked at the rug, which was lying on the floor and looking, well, ruggy. 'If you tell me that's a god, first time we get back to Earth, I'm having your head read.'

'No, no, no, no,' the Doctor said. 'They were just using it, manipulating it from a distance through their powers. Letting me know that they're here.'

'You?' she said. 'What do they want with you?'

'Who knows,' the Doctor said. But he turned away so she couldn't see his face, and she knew that he was lying.

That night the Doctor slept. Which in itself was strange, but perhaps it was just his body's way of telling him he needed to take things slowly. He did sleep, perhaps once every hundred years or so. But most of the time he could get by with the odd catnap here, and a snooze there.

No wonder we Gallifreyans have no imagination. We've never experienced bedtime stories.

The dream was mundane, as dreams go. An old companion here, and old monster there. No symbolism, or tendrils of angst reaching up from his subconscious. Not even the glaring faces of past selves, clamouring to be let out. Sigmund would have frowned at this, and commented about repression. But those heady days in Vienna were long gone, bodies away. So he slept, peacefully enough.

He woke.

A throaty chuckle echoed around the room.

He opened his eyes, and for a moment he thought he was still asleep. Everything was black, not even a crack of light coming in under the door. That wasn't right. He tried to scratch his nose.

Something was wrong, something was stopping his hand moving. Again he tried, but still nothing. So he tried to shout, but that didn't work either.

He sent out a little psychic wave. Sam was fast asleep in the next room... no good. Next time I get a companion, he thought, I'm going to make sure she's a latent telepath.

Maguire was further away, probably downstairs still. She was dreaming about her brother, and the Doctor's plea for help disappeared into the maelstrom.

Then a little thread cautiously extended to meet his mental probe. It felt different. Not quite alive. Colder, harder. Of course, the Spider!

He sent out a quick burst of instructions, and collapsed back onto his pillows.

It didn't know why it had followed this not-man, the one whose skin smelled so strange and had so many different patterns. It was not built to think or to reason. Its purpose was to read and listen and remember. And it remembered that this not-man was like nothing it had experienced before.

Not the other eight-legs it had been created to study. Or the two-legs it had read after a trader stole it and sold it to the woman with hard hands. It did not feel emotions. Yet it had experienced strange data surges when the not-man's strange hands gently touched him. Its cerebral cortex digitised, coded, analysed the impulses. Suggestion - follow him. Possibility of learning more.

So it had.

It scuttled across the Doctor's bedroom floor until it found a gap in the wooden floorboards. Carefully, it put its front two legs into the hole, and eased its body through. Below, the warrior-woman was sleeping.

It did not feel scared. It merely weighed up the odds, calculating the trajectory with subroutines it didn't know existed, and dropped through the hole.

'Wassamatter?' Maguire waved a hand around, trying to swat away the fly. It connected with something hard. Something cold. Then she woke up.

She was still downstairs, curled up on the sofa. Someone had tucked a pillow under her head, and put a blanket over her. But still her legs were numb, and her back was killing.

And Sam?

Oh.

The Spider was crawling up her arm. It stopped, and looked up at her. It beeped quickly, once, twice, three times. Then three times slowly. Three times quickly again.

Dot, dot, dot, dash, dash, dash... her Morse code was pretty rusty, but she knew an SOS when she heard one. There is something wrong, isn't there?' she asked the Spider. 'If you just want to go home, I'll take you apart with a knife and fork.'

But she knew better than to go back to sleep. That could get you killed. So she sat up and knocked some life into her aching limbs.

'Sam?' she said. The Spider was silent. 'The Doctor?' A muted squeak. 'It would be, wouldn't it.'

She carefully reached out for the Spider and sat it on her shoulder. Then she made her way upstairs to his room. No light under the door, no sound coming from inside.

'Umm, Doctor?' she whispered. Then a little louder. 'Doctor, are you okay?' God, she felt ridiculous. He was probably reading, or composing a concerto for a string quartet and the spoons. But she knocked again, and when he didn't answer she pushed open the door.

There was a Doctor-shaped pile of rope on the bed, a pile that was gently moving up and down. The way someone's chest would if they were trying to breathe whilst tied up. For a moment she wanted to laugh. 'I know you get tied up in your work, but this is ridiculous.' Then she pulled out her knife and set to work on the ropes. The Doctor's head emerged like a butterfly from a cocoon.

'Get Sam,' he gasped, clutching for the knife. 'We're leaving.'

Maguire was already halfway to the door. 'Now?'

'Now!'

She thudded down the corridor, and burst into Sam's room. Their room. The room they'd been sharing. She scooped up Sam's t-shirt and jeans and shook her awake. 'Sammie, we're leaving.'

Sam rubbed her eyes. 'What do you want?'

Outside, the wind began to pick up.

The Doctor sawed away at the rope, his hands working furiously. A strand fell away, and then another. Only a few more to go. The wind was getting stronger, he noticed.

Sam and Maguire appeared in the doorway. Sam was still struggling to pull on her boots.

The Doctor struggled free. As the last strand of rope fell to the floor, the shutters exploded inwards, and the wind rushed in. 'Go,' he screamed. 'Go, go, go!'

The wind caught up a pile of books and threw them across the room, one after the other. One thudded into the doorframe, inches from Maguire's head.

The TARDIS was in the basement, tucked between a wine rack and a wardrobe that contained winter coats. The wind chased them downstairs, getting stronger all the time. By the time they reached the bottom of the staircase they were all clutching at each other for support. The Doctor stepped out into the room, his face crumpling against the wind. Maguire tried to follow him, but the wind pushed her back.

'Give me your hand,' the Doctor roared. They joined hands, and he tried to pull her across the room. One step, another, only a couple more to go...

Then the bottles began shooting out of the wine rack. The Doctor threw up his hands, letting go of Maguire, as glass and wine crashed to the floor. Half a bottle caught Sam across the temple, and she slumped to the floor.

'Doctor!' Maguire grabbed Sam, and hefted her onto her shoulders. 'She's hurt.'

The Doctor made his way back to them, ducking missiles. 'Change of plan,' he said, and sprinted up the stairs.

Maguire followed, trying not to knock Sam against the walls. Oh Christ, she wasn't moving, wasn't even making a noise. But there wasn't any time for that, not with the Doctor clutching her hand, dragging her through the house, and -

Out the front door?

'Where the hell are we going?' she said, between puffs. Fit she was, but Sam was a dead weight on her shoulders. The Doctor stopped, and looked back at her. 'Temple of Artemis,' he said. 'Gods have an agreement not to go into each others' temples. Safe there.' He gently reached up, and lifted Sam down from her shoulders. 'Let me help.'

Maguire knew she was going to have nightmares about that wild race through the streets of Neo Graecia. The Doctor ran on and on, while her lungs burned as she tried to keep up with him. Sam slumped between them, her feet dragging. The wind chased them all the way, tearing at their hair and shrieking with laughter. Trees reached down to grab at them, and the cobblestones were loose, or sharp, or slippery.

Finally, they stood before an imposing marble building, all columns and statues and heavy wooden doors.

'Sanctuary,' the Doctor yelled, his voice almost lost in the wind. 'We seek sanctuary with the Goddess.' He pushed Maguire and Sam in the direction of the doors. They stumbled across onto the marble steps - and suddenly the wind was gone. But when Maguire looked back at the Doctor, out on the street, the wind was still tearing at his hair.

The door creaked open slowly. She couldn't help thinking of horror movies, and waited for the hunchback to emerge and mutter something about not getting many strangers round these parts.

Instead, a woman stepped out. Young, dressed in white, and carrying a lantern. 'What do you want?' Somehow she made it sound perfectly normal, and reasonable.

'Sanctuary,' the Doctor said. As he spoke, the wind surrounding him melted back into the shadows. 'Some god has quarrel with me. My friends have no part in this. I ask that you give them shelter.'

'Hang on,' Maguire said. 'What about you?'

The priestess held the lantern up for a closer look. 'No man may enter this temple,' she said. 'Not even your friend, although he is known to us. But you may enter, and be safe.' She reached out, and put her arm around Sam's waist. Maguire realised that Sammie still hadn't moved, and fumbled frantically for a pulse.

Weak, but still there, thank god.

The Doctor smiled. 'You'll be safe here.'

'Yeah, but what will you do?' More white-robed priestesses were emerging from the temple now, reaching out for Sam, and beckoning to Maguire.

'Apollo's temple is just around the corner,' he said. 'I'll drop in on him. Don't worry, I'll be safe there. Don't leave the temple until I come for you. I'll be back in the morning.' And then he was gone, whistling as he walked. The women ushered Maguire into the temple.

She sat there, stroking Sam's hand, and remembering Tom's funeral. The horrible black dress that itched around the collar, seeing her father cry for the first time, singing Amazing Grace as Tom's rugby mates carried the coffin out. And now Sammie was lying there, paler than pale, surrounded by white. Oh god, she couldn't lose someone else. Not again.

The young priestess who had let them in gently unpeeled her hand from Sam's, and led her across the temple. 'I am Karessa,' she said. 'I'm sorry we have neglected you, but we were anxious about your... friend.'

'I'm pretty anxious about her, too. Is she okay?'

Karessa nodded. 'She has concussion and bruising, but she is sleeping soundly.'

For a moment, Maguire forgot how to stand up. When she remembered again, the priestess had an arm around her, and was helping her to a pile of rugs and pillows. 'Are you hurt?'

'Just tired,' Maguire said. 'Hell of a day.'

'I understand,' Karessa said. 'Sleep here. The Goddess will keep you safe.'

She wanted to tell Karessa that she was an agnostic.

Instead, she curled up and fell asleep.

When she woke again, it was early morning. Sam was snoring gently beside her. Overnight, a bruise had blossomed on her temple, purple leading into brown and yellow. Maguire looked her up and down. She seemed okay, thank goodness. Impossible to check further without waking her - and she didn't want to do that, not just yet.

Instead, she got up, and looked around.

Maguire had always been the exploring type. Even before she joined UNIT, she'd always needed to know where she was, and where everything else was. Some kind of survival instinct, probably, and one that had saved her life on a couple of occasions.

She stepped out of the little room they were in, and found herself in an open courtyard. There were more rooms on three sides of the square; on the fourth side were the heavy wooden doors they'd been admitted through. There was a vague smell of incense, and flowers.

In the centre of the courtyard was an altar. It was covered with flowers - some still fresh, others dead and dying. The woman kneeling in front of the altar was dressed in white, although she looked older than most of the priestesses Maguire had seen the night before.

'Good morning,' the woman said, turning to look at her. Maguire couldn't help staring. She was grotesque - overweight, huge buck teeth curving across her lips, hair that looked like it hadn't been brushed for years. Her face was pock-marked and scarred. She was barefoot, and her skin was streaked with dirt. Strangely, her robe was pristine white.

'Urn. Hi.'

The woman got up then, standing six foot plus, and turned to face Maguire. 'So, what will you do now?'

Til think about it after I have breakfast.' A lie; her plans consisted of breakfast, getting out of there, and getting an explanation. And not necessarily in that order.

'And what of your friend who went to the House of Apollo?'

Ah. So she did know the Doctor. Well, no surprises there. 'Go get him, I guess.'

'I wouldn't if I were you,' the woman said. She reached down, and picked up a rose. One by one, she tore off the petals.

Wasn't that sacrilege? Maguire watched, wondering what Karessa would say when she found out.

'Why not?' she said, at last.

'The Gods are walking,' the woman said. She put the rose petals on her palm, and made a fist. Grey dust showered down onto the altar. 'Those who get in their path had best beware.'

'Urn,' Maguire said. 'I know this is probably pretty rude of me, considering how nice everyone's been. But what if I don't believe in gods?'

'My dear, one might as well ask "what if the Gods don't believe in me?".'

'That doesn't follow,' Maguire said.

'It doesn't have to. The Gods are a law unto themselves. They're like children, always squabbling over something or another.'

There was a sound under the altar, and a kitten, no, a pair of kittens emerged. They twined round the woman's ankles. She reached down, and picked one up. 'They're like these two, always fighting because one has something the other wants. And what do they do with it once they get it?'

'I don't know.' The other kitten wandered over, and Maguire picked it up. It was heavy, despite its size. She stroked it absently, and it purred.

'What do they do?' the woman repeated. 'Nothing.'

Maguire nodded. 'Yeah. Been there, done that, cleaned up afterwards.' Memories, unbidden, raced through her mind and back to the dark corners again.

'Of course,' the woman said. 'I had forgotten that you were a warrior. A lonely life, some might say. But you don't choose it, it chooses you.'

The woman was starting to creep her out. 'Not necessarily,' Maguire said. 'I made the decision to join up, I chose.'

'If that's what you want to think, my dear,' the woman said. 'Now if you'll excuse me, I must be attending to something.' She plucked the kitten from Maguire's arms, took two steps forward, and vanished.

One minute she was there, mid-stride, the next minute Maguire was alone in the temple, brushing cat hair off her top. She didn't want to think about it. Too many impossible things before breakfast.

Instead, she opened one of the doors. She took two steps outside the temple, and then stopped. It was raining. But she wasn't getting wet. There seemed to be some kind of invisible dome over the temple. The rain touched it - and disappeared. Maguire took a couple of steps outside the temple, and the water thudded down onto her shoulders. She stepped back, and the rain wasn't touching her. What the...? What kind of technology could create such strong forcefields?

There was a movement behind her, and she spun around. Karessa stood there, carrying a lantern. 'Jacqueline? I've just looked on Sam, and when I saw you weren't there, I wondered...'

'How is she?'

'Still sleeping. But she will be ready to travel in a few hours, and completely recovered in a day or so.'

'Oh, thank god.' Maguire flopped against the doorjamb. 'I don't know what I'd do if something bad happened to her. Really bad, I mean. We've been through stuff, but she's handled it. We've handled it.'

Karessa nodded. 'She's very lucky.'

'Yeah. We've had a few close calls.'

'No, I mean she's lucky to have you.'

'Thanks.' Her face reddened. Embarrassed, Maguire glanced down at her shoes, then up at the sky. Still raining. Still dry.

She waved her hand around vaguely. 'How...?' Her sentence trailed off.

'Each temple is safe from the machinations of the other Gods,' Karessa said. 'It is an agreement they forged long ago when the worlds were young. When the Gods are angry, they make their displeasure known in many ways. Today it is the weather.'

'One of the gods?' Maguire said. 'How many do you have?'

Karessa pondered for a moment. 'Here in Neo Grascia we follow Artemis and Apollo, because they are tied to our foundation stories. Other cities have their own gods. We all acknowledge Life and Pain and Death, because those are life experiences we must all share.'

Maguire didn't like the way this was heading. The Doctor's mentioned Life and Pain and Death to me. They worship them on Gallifrey. And there's one called Time, as well.'

'The Doctor's people have a unique perception of time,' Karessa said. 'But like us they sometimes feel pain. Sometimes they even die.'

'But they're just abstract concepts. They're not real,' Maguire said.

'So you believe. We believe otherwise. I think the Doctor shares some of our beliefs. He brought you here, knowing you would be safe.'

Maguire nodded. 'Okay,' she said. 'Point made. Where is he, anyway? He should be here by now.'

'That's what I came to tell you,' Karessa said. 'We have been in contact with the priests of Apollo, and they have not seen him.'

'He didn't make it?'

Karessa shook her head. 'No. I'm sorry.'

The knot that was her stomach tightened a little more.

Maguire ignored it, and took a couple of deep breaths. 'Right, I'm going after him. Don't tell Sam.'

'Do you think it's wise?'

'Of course not,' Maguire grinned. 'It's what he'd do, isn't it?'

Karessa smiled, and gently touched Maguire's forehead. 'Blessed be,' she said. 'Apollo's temple is through the market, and towards the north gate.'

'Thanks,' Maguire said. She strode out into the wind and the rain.

Within minutes, she was hopelessly lost. The rows and rows of stalls all looked the same to her. Especially as it seemed to be half-day trading. Only a few of the stalls were open. The rest of the tents were shut, pinned down to try and give some protection from the weather. And there weren't many customers around, either. It had stopped raining, although there were puddles everywhere.

Maguire gave up trying to think about the sciences involved in weather manipulation, and thought about Karessa, instead. She hadn't really known many religious types. UNIT had chaplains, of course. They didn't force religion on you, but some people found it comforting to pray to their god before they went out to get blown into little pieces. Or to blow somebody else into little pieces.

Maguire found it more comforting to go out and get cheerfully tanked.

Once she'd even brought her section's chaplain along. When he wasn't comforting souls, he was a damn fine metaphysicist, and together they'd just seen off the little green men for another day. As she moved from wine to beer to vodka, Jamal had stayed on orange juice, getting quieter as she got louder.

'See,' she'd slurred around midnight, 'If there is a god, then why do we need soldiers? Why doesn't he just kill the Daleks and Cyber-wotsits himself?'

Jamal contemplated the mysteries of the universe as they applied to his orange juice. 'Allah gives me my reasons. You need to find your own. Does that help?'

She tried to shrug, but ended up grabbing onto the bar for support. 'Dunno. Maybe. At least you didn't tell me that all I have to do is believe, and I'd be saved.'

Maguire realised that she was only about ten yards away from the weaver-woman's tent. There was sound coming from it; the noise of a loom, mixed with a soft moaning that went on and on and on.

It was the Doctor. It just had to be. Maguire wasn't sure how she knew, but she wasn't going to argue with that part of her brain. It had saved her life often enough. Right. So, the Doctor was prisoner of one little old lady with a lot of rope.

It'd be simple to charge in, gun drawn, and try and bluff the two of them out there. Simple, and probably stupid. She didn't have the Doctor's gift of the gab, and appearances could be deceiving, especially in a place like this. First thing, get more information.

She cautiously stepped closer to the tent, and peered inside. The Doctor was slumped against the centrepole. There was thick rope wrapped around him, holding him to the post. She saw how pale his face was, in stark contrast to the dark green of his velvet coat. And then she noticed the golden thread spilling out from his mouth and nose, shimmering through the gloom of the tent.

The loom sat in a corner of the tent. The weaver woman was bent over it, spinning whatever the hell it was into some kind of pattern. She pulled on the thread, and the Doctor moaned. She pulled it again, harshly this time.

The Doctor slumped forward against the rope, and the woman smiled. She got up from her loom and stood, hands on hips, watching him.

'So the Timelord finally runs into a knot he can't unravel,' she said.

'Hyperbole will get you everywhere,' the Doctor said.

Maguire had to strain to hear what he was saying. The words came out slowly, a syllable at a time. He punctuated the sentence with a defiant grin, then his head dropped onto his chest.

The weaver-woman forced his head upwards. 'And absurdity, dear Doctor, will get you killed.' A pair of golden scissors appeared in her free hand. She opened up the blades, and eased them closer to the Doctor's face. 'Don't flatter yourself. You are not so important to my plans that I won't kill you here and now.'

The Doctor mumbled something, but Maguire could only hear the final words. ' - end my life.'

She laughed. The scissors thudded shut, only an inch away from the thread. The Doctor jerked, then collapsed backwards.

'No,' the woman said. 'I didn't think you meant it. But I do. Don't doubt that.'

Someone pushed Maguire aside, and strode into the tent.

Maguire picked herself up, and watched as Sam moved between the weaver woman and the Doctor.

Sammie? The concussion must have been worse than they'd suspected.

Maguire's hand went to her holster, and she took half a step inside the tent. 'What's...'

No-one took any notice.

'This was not in the agreement,' Sam said. 'You come close to breaching your side of the bargain.'

She looked very cute, Maguire thought, in someone's white robe and sandals. They suited her. On the other hand, her voice and body language didn't suit her. They were wrong. It might have been Sam standing there, but it wasn't Sam talking.

The weaver woman scrutinised Sam, looking her up and down.

'So. You sneak up here. You take the body of a mortal so that I will not detect you. And yet you have the hide to speak to me of broken promises?' She threw up her hands. Black light flared around her, spiralling out towards Sam.

Sam reached out a hand, and plucked the blackness from the air. A child's tricks,' she said. 'I had expected something better.' On the last two words, she crumpled up the handful of blackness, and threw it back at the woman. .

It exploded, knocking the tent walls outwards. One of the poles caught Maguire across the temple, and she dropped to the ground.

She woke up feeling like Lethbridge-Stewart himself had been tap-dancing on her skull. No time for that, though. The tent-pole was leaning at a crazy angle, with the Doctor still strung up on it.

The golden thread ran from his face to the loom, spilling all around the tent.

The two women were gone, and in the distance Maguire thought she heard an explosion.

The Doctor's eyes flickered open.

'Jacqueline,' he rasped. 'Thank goodness...'

'Sssh, save your breath,' she scolded. Already she had her knife out, and was trying to saw through his bonds. The rope was tougher than she'd first thought. Her knife didn't seem to be making the slightest impression.

'Scissors,' the Doctor whispered.

The golden scissors were sitting next to the loom. As soon as Maguire brought them near to the rope, it fell away. She managed to catch the Doctor before he fell, sliding the scissors into her pocket.

The earth shook. In the distance, there was another explosion.

'What the hell is going on?'

'Must stop them,' the Doctor mumbled. The golden thread was still trailing from his face, his mouth -

She slung an arm around his waist and helped him stand. He hobbled over to the loom, and brought his fist down in the middle of it. Again. And again. Pieces of wood and golden thread sprayed everywhere. The Doctor kept hammering until the frame was broken and the weaving had collapsed into a pile of shimmering thread.

'What is that?' Maguire asked.

The Doctor leant forward, and gathered up the thread. 'Pure biodata,' he said. 'She was unravelling me from the inside. Rather like being a dropped stitch.' He balanced it almost reverently on his palms for a moment, then threw it into the air.

It vanished.

He stood still, eyes screwed shut.

As Maguire watched the colour ran back into his face like a receding tide. The creases in his face smoothed out, and when he opened his eyes, he was smiling. 'Come on,' he grinned. 'We've got to stop them.'

'Is this where I get to say "But why, Doctor?"?'

'If you think it would help.'

Til say it anyway,' she said, reaching out to tweak his nose. 'But why, Doctor?'

'You know, I'm rather glad you asked me that.' He strode across the square. 'Because at least one of them doesn't belong on this world, that's why.'

As she sprinted after him, Maguire kept noticing little details. Like the path of broken and damaged tents. A pile of feathers and twisted little bodies. Destruction, clear as any beacon. A path leading them to Sam, and the woman.

They caught up with them in the centre of the market, throwing fireballs at each other. They were treating them like toddlers would play with a beach ball. First one would throw something, then the other would catch it, play with it, throw it back. Maguire watched the flaming spheres pass from Sam's right hand to her left, and marvelled that there were no scorch marks.

She put up a hand, and caught the Doctor mid-stride. 'Doctor, that's not my Sam. Who is it?'

'I'm not sure, Jacqueline, but I think it's Artemis.'

Maguire raised an eyebrow. 'As in the goddess? You're joking, right?'

'Deadly serious,' he said. He gently plucked her hand off his shoulder, and strode into the middle of the fray. Artemis - Sam, damn it - paused, spinning a fireball on her index finger.

'Doctor. What a pleasant surprise.'

The Doctor clutched his lapels. 'I'd like to say that the feeling is mutual,' he said, slowly turning from one to another.

'But that would be an absurdity. What do you want with me and my companions?'

Sam's mouth opened, and something completely unlike Sam's voice came out. 'I have no quarrel with you, Doctor. I merely use this body to do my work. As is my right.'

'Your right?' the weaver woman spat. 'You interfere with the Gallifreyan. You know that by all our ancient accords, only we have the right to help or hinder him.'

We? Maguire scrutinised the woman. She didn't look much. Just like the weird old lady who lived next door to every school and wouldn't give you your ball back when it went over the fence.

'You broke the agreement first,' Sam accused.

The Doctor held up his hands. 'Ladies, please, there's more than enough of me to go around. Now, it seems that you've got a bit of a problem with your protocol, hmm? Artemis feels like her toes are being stepped on. Lady Death feels that my presence gives her precedence.'

Maguire did a double-take. Death? He was kidding, right? He had to be. The woman looked like someone's Gran. Not somebody who moonlighted with a cloak and scythe. The Doctor was still rambling on, and she recognised a typical Number 28: distract the enemy with impeccable logic.

'Now, why don't we sit down about it and have a cup of tea. We can talk about it reasonably and determine who has the authority here. I'm sure the priests would be only too happy to come up with the relevant bits of scriptures. And we can get in a canon law expert, some Gallifreyan record keepers. Do the whole thing properly. Mustn't cut any corners, you know.'

'Enough,' Death said, her one syllable cutting across the Doctor's sentence. 'Doctor, you prattle.'

'Prattle? I'm quite insulted. Ramble, yes. And perhaps a bit of blarney. But I draw the line at prattling.'

'I said enough,' she reminded him. She flung her hands out. 'My rules, Doctor. My way.' The earth shook. Maguire pitched forward, showered by crumbling dirt and masonry. There were screams, distant and near. One voice climbed half an octave, before stopping abruptly.

There was anguish in the Doctor's eyes. 'Don't let more people die on your account.'

'Whose account, Doctor?' Death sneered. 'What I do here is because of you.'

Sam frowned. 'What you do here is outstay your welcome, and destroy my world.' She raised her hands, fire pooling in them.

A voice echoed around the square, around the city itself.

'STOP!'

It was the Doctor's voice.

And everything stopped. The pitch and fall of the aftershocks, the voices, the settling masonry. All as still as a wax tableau.

Death smiled. 'As you wish, Doctor.'

People froze in the act of getting out of bed, or scurrying under a table. Wounds stopped bleeding, lives stopped ebbing away.

Maguire froze, too; her mouth slightly open, a sentence unfinished, her hands clenched somewhere in front of her chest.

The Doctor stuck his hands into his coat pockets. 'No-one else dies,' he whispered.

'Sentimentality has always been your weakness,' Death said. 'Without it, there is so much more you could do. So much more you could be.'

'Do you think that's what I want?'

Death laughed. 'We have been watching you, Doctor. You love the power. Gallifrey shuts itself up to study history, while you are out there making history. Changing history. The only reason you bargained with us in the first place was so that you could feel superior.'

'Bargain?' Sam raised an eyebrow. What bargain?'

Death smiled. 'Long ago, the Doctor came to us -'

'It's a lie.'

'- with a very special bargain in mind. You see, he wanted to be like us. He wanted the power to shape the universe. He was prepared to sell his soul. Only it didn't cost him quite as much as that. Only - do you want to tell her, Doctor, or shall I?'

The Doctor's shoulders crumpled. 'It wasn't like that; he said. 'I was young, I was -'

'An outcast,' Death said. 'And like all outcasts you dreamed of the day when you would crush them under your feet. Only you couldn't do that when your brothers and sisters and Loom-born were among them. You loved them, although they tormented you. Worm.'

A soft hiss escaped the Doctor's mouth.

'And you couldn't love people you wanted to destroy. So in return for the power, what do you think the Doctor gave up?'

Sam frowned at the Doctor, hands on hips. 'Is this true?'

'No, no, no,' the Doctor said. 'The Eternals approached me. They offered a bargain. Gallifrey was sterile and cloistered. They offered me a taste of freedom. And I promised -'

'He promised that he would never love,' Death said. 'It seemed fitting.'

The Doctor's head bowed. 'I did. And don't think I haven't regretted it ever since.'

'You broke the bargain. Grace Holloway.'

'Is this what this is all about?' The Doctor's voice cracked. 'You're tormenting me over a kiss? I should introduce you to Sigmund. You two would get along famously.'

'Flippancy again, Doctor,' Death said. 'Your seventh self would never have done that.'

'My seventh self would have had three plans and a counter-plan to deal with this,' the Doctor said. 'He would have visited here a hundred years ago and laid a series of traps. And made a bet with Time over the result, and -'

His eyes widened. 'That's what it's really about, isn't it. It's bruising your ego that I won't play your little games any more. You don't want someone who'll keep a bargain. You want a dancing monkey that will do your knitting with the threads of the universe. Well, I won't.'

'Oh, but you will,' Death said.

There was a shimmering in the air.

'- is going on?' Maguire said. Her hands dropped to her sides, and she looked around. 'I said -'

'It seems only fitting,' Death said. 'Artemis has one of your companions, so I can have the other.'

Maguire felt her right hand go down to her belt, fumble around, and emerge with her gun. She tried to put it back. She tried to stop her hand moving, bringing the gun up until it was level with her face and moving still closer. 'Doctor!' she screamed. 'Help me!'

'Leave her,' the Doctor shouted. 'She doesn't belong in this.'

'She does now, Doctor,' Death said. 'Are you so stubborn that you will let her die rather than side with me? You know I can offer you even more.'

'I know,' said the Doctor, with barely-concealed scorn in his voice. 'I collected the ashes of the last person unwise enough deal with you.' He stood facing her; the tall, upright man, and the bowed little woman. Maguire decided that she would have found the image amusing, if it wasn't for the circumstances.

The Doctor turned his back on Death. He looked at

Maguire, one eyebrow raised. Maguire knew what he was asking, and tried to shake her head. But she couldn't move, and the question went unanswered. For a moment the floodgates gave way, and panic poured over the Doctor's face. Then his control was back, muscles resolute, and cheeks free from sweat.

He turned back to Death. 'I will not deal,' he said slowly. 'I will not become Death's Champion.'

Out of the corner of her eye, Maguire saw the Doctor's face crumple up slightly, and Artemis place a hand on his shoulder in an un-godly manner. Then her fingers pulled the trigger.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Click.

Click.

The gun dropped to the ground, and Maguire followed shortly afterwards.

'Jac!' Sam screamed. She dropped to her knees next to Maguire, and grabbed for her. 'Jacqueline, oh god, Doctor, do something.'

The Doctor knelt down next to her, and felt for a pulse. 'You know it was never loaded.'

The slap, when it came, surprised him. He rocked back on his knees, his hand reaching up to trace the imprint of Sam's hand. His cheek was flaming.

'You ever, ever do that again -' Sam said, and burst into tears.

Maguire propped herself up on one elbow, and pulled Sam in close. 'It's okay, he knew what he was doing, ssh, it's okay. I just fainted for a minute there.'

A shadow fell across them. 'Touching,' Death said, hands on hips. 'And resourceful beyond my expectations, Doctor. You have certainly proved yourself.'

The Doctor got to his feet in one fluid movement. Something spilled from his pocket, but he didn't seem to notice. 'If you think it was just about that,' he said, 'You were wrong. Extremely wrong. By the way, have you seen Artemis recently? The real Artemis, I mean.'

Death scanned the horizon. Everything was still, unmoving. 'I -' she said. Then stopped.

A wind ripped past her, and through the square. When it cleared, two figures - a man and a woman - stood front of her. The man was young, and glowing faintly golden. The woman was old and haggard, carrying a pair of kittens.

The Doctor bowed his head to them. 'Artemis. Apollo.'

Maguire gaped. That was Artemis? That was a goddess she'd spoken to, that she'd practically dismissed without a second thought?

'Doctor,' Apollo said with a voice like sunbeams. 'Not the welcome you deserve. Forgive my sister. She was anxious to see the trespasser evicted from our world.'

Artemis tugged on a greying lock of hair. 'My brother and I do not always look on things the same way. But on this we agree: you are the more welcome visitor.'

Together, the gods turned to face Death.

Death faced them. Black smoke collected in her hands, and spilled out towards Sam and Maguire. It touched the silvery-black thread surrounding them, and vanished. 'How?' Death snarled.

The Doctor smiled, and picked up the Spider from Maguire's left shoulder. Trails of thread still dripped from its appendages. 'It was originally designed just to study DNA, but I think it evolved somewhere along the way. We all do, you know. That's my biodata surrounding them. So as far as the agreement is concerned, they're a part of me. Which makes them off-limits.'.

As the Doctor was speaking, Apollo and Artemis surrounded Death with pools of light. It twined around Death's black smoke, creating vines of contrast. Pillars surrounded Death, forming bars, forming a cage. Then the black smoke exploded, knocking Apollo and Artemis down. The city rocked.

Death smiled. 'I win,' she smiled. 'I always do.'

'Unlikely,' Apollo said. A sword appeared in his hands. Artemis was suddenly clutching a bow and quiver.

'Doctor, there'll be nothing left by the time they're finished,' Maguire whispered.

He nodded. 'I know. There must be something binding Death here. Some kind of link to this dimension.'

A flaming arrow plunged into the ground a foot away from them. They all winced.

'Owl' Maguire shifted position. 'Something dug into me.' She reached into her pocket, and brought out Death's golden scissors.

Her eyes met the Doctor's. He nodded.

'You do it,' she said, passing them to him.

'With pleasure.' He brought the scissors down over his knee.

They splintered, a metallic cracking mixing with Death's scream as she slowly disappeared from view.

Artemis and Apollo stopped. They looked around. Then, somewhat shame-facedly, they sheathed their weapons.

'Again, Doctor,' Apollo said. 'Again we are indebted to you.' He extended a hand to the Doctor, and helped him up. The air around them shimmered. They were talking to each other, but no sound reached Maguire and Sam.

One of Artemis' kittens began licking Sam's hand. Sam looked up for the first time. She grinned, and scratched the cat behind the ears. Which left Maguire looking up at Artemis.

'Urn,' she said, trying to find a better opening line, look, I know I said I didn't believe in you, but-'

Artemis treated her to a gap-toothed grin. 'My dear, I found our conversation quite refreshing. It's not every day that I come across someone like you.'

Sam hid a chuckle. Goddess and warrior turned to look at her.

'Sorry -' they all said, and smiled in mutual sheepishness.

'You first,' Maguire said.

'No, you,' Artemis said.

Who could argue with a goddess?

Sam could. 'Mags, there's no need. I love you, yeah? All of you. And I'm sorry for -' And then she found it hard to talk, because Maguire's mouth gently covered hers.

'It is well,' Artemis nodded. 'And I should apologise for taking control of you. My brother reminds me that mortals are not puppets, and have free will. But I do not learn these things so easily. The habits of centuries are hard to change.'

Maguire and Sam broke, to look up at the goddess. Artemis smiled, and reached out her hands. One hand touched Sam's head, the other touched Maguire's. It was a gentle touch; soft despite the wrinkles and calluses on the hands.

Almost despite herself, Maguire closed her eyes.

'Walk with the goddess behind you, live with the goddess beside you, love with the goddess inside you,' Artemis said. 'Blessed be.' Warmth flooded from her fingers.

When Maguire opened her eyes, Artemis and Apollo had gone. The Doctor was standing, once again, with his back to them.

'Anyone for breakfast?' he asked.

Unseen Rooms

By

Imran Inyat

Deep within the TARDIS, there's a room no one's ever visited.

In fact, there are many rooms no one's ever visited. We'll just focus on this one for the moment.

Inside, it's a circular room, about 2.5 metres high. The floor is inlaid with the Seal of Rassilon in the centre. The ceiling disappears whenever you look at it, so it's not important.

What is of interest is the painting on the wall. It depicts a large number of people, all apparently at a party. A human observer, looking at the painting, might comment on the penguin's presence. Or the robot dog. Or the Ice Warrior in full armour.

But it is arranged such that no figure appears out of place. All appear to fit snugly into the painting.

The artist appears to have painted each figure with care and attention. Even the slightest details (the shadings of hair colour, the shadows on the fabrics) are perfectly placed.

There is a feeling that the artist knew the subjects, personally. As if they were old friends. Knowing they were capable of great pettiness, and great nobility.

Knowing what they could have done, and may yet do...

And in this way, through this painting, the artist (remembers? honours?) them, wherever they may be. Dead, alive, lost... this is how the artist knows them.

Oddly, two of the figures are incomplete. The outlines of figures have been sketched in, but it appears as if the artist has decided to come back when he/she better understands them. One appears to be that of a tall, thin young man, with (apparently) a guitar strapped round his back, and a pack of cigarettes in one hand. He appears, from the outline, to be giving a thumbs up to somebody, perhaps the short, blonde girl in the T-shirt and combat trousers.

The other is even more indistinct, being at present an impression of auburn hair and combat jacket. However, there is a feeling of presence to the figure, as if it's seized on a certain set of ideas, focusing on them and them alone....

This is her memory of their fellow travellers, safe against the time he forgets (and he will, no matter how he might wish it otherwise...)

This Hollywood Life
By
Jonathan W. Dennis

It was cold, the metal. Dawn had only come an hour ago and there had not been time for the California sun to warm it. The Doctor reached down a hand and touched the ground, letting just the tips of his fingers play across the surrounding terrazzo and then the brass of the name itself. He closed his eyes and let his fingers run over the letters as if they were Braille instead of simple embossed English letters.

'Come take a look at this, Fitz,' he said.

Fitz's hand came halfway up to remove the cigarette from his mouth before he realised there was none there. It was difficult to take his eyes off the store window of the Pleasure Chest, where mannequins stood in sundry tableaux dressed in latex, leather, and chains. He shuffled over to see the star that had caught the Doctor's eye.

'Nice neighbourhood. Fun for the whole family, eh Doctor?' The Doctor's shadow was obscuring the name and Fitz had to squint to make it out. 'Greta Garbo? I suppose you knew her as well?'

'I wouldn't say I knew her. I know very few people if you take into account the size of the universe, but we met more than once,' he said, neither getting up or turning to look at Fitz. He was staring at the star. Fitz could picture the stare, he had seen it enough, the even, intense look of a cat staring at an aquarium.

'Iris would love this,' the Doctor continued. 'I wonder if she's ever been here?' His voice trailed off as he got lost even farther in the convoluted paths of his own memories.

Titillating shops not withstanding, Fitz was getting bored. Two-thirds of the personages represented by the stars were past his time and he simply did not care about the other third. He looked at the star past Garbo's, another unfamiliar name.

'Doctor, who's William Shatner?'

As soon as they had turned the corner and seen the cameras surrounding the building, a huge grin spread across the Doctor's face. He motioned Fitz to follow and ran to join the crowd gathering outside the barriers lining the site.

It took a couple of minutes for Fitz to reach the Doctor. He refused to appear eager to watch. When he made his way to the Doctor's side, he noticed the Doctor staring intently at the building, frowning. He pulled his pocket watch out, checked the time, and put it back in his waistcoat pocket.

'What's wrong?' asked Fitz.

'The banners,' said the Doctor, pointing to the side of the building. About fifteen meters up, on each side of the building, hung multi-coloured banners proclaiming in huge block letters, 'End of the Millennium Party.'

'I was afraid there might be something wrong with the temporal stabilisers,' continued the Doctor. 'But it's when I thought we were. The banners are just for the filming.' The Doctor said all this in a reassuring tone and Fitz just did not have the heart to tell the Doctor that it did not really matter to him if they were in 1999 or 2009, he was still bored.

'Okay people,' blared a voice from in front of the crowd. A member of the crew was addressing them with a megaphone. 'We're getting ready to start shooting, so we need you to please keep quiet.'

The noise gradually died down from the din of dozens of people all trying to talk over each other to as close to complete quiet as a mass of gawking humanity can get.

Fitz moved a little to either side to try and get a glimpse of the film crew behind the barricades but there were too many people. There was no way he was going to stand on his tip toes and crane his neck to get a look. Next to him, the Doctor stood on his tip toes and craned his neck to get a look.

'Isn't this interesting?' asked the Doctor.

"Absolutely thrilling,' Fitz responded, trying to get his hand to his pocket so he could retrieve a cigarette without brushing his hand against any of the surrounding people in a manner that would get him a nasty look or slapped.

'Action,' shouted the man with the megaphone. The crowd stared at the building, expectantly, seeing nothing until one person thought to look up and pointed for the benefit of those around him. The realisation rapidly spread through the crowd and eyes turned skyward. Two people were lowering themselves from the roof, using something that looked to be too thick to be a rope. The larger figure was dressed all in white, the smaller one in white and red. That was the most detail Fitz could make out at this distance. They were so far away he could not tell if they were male or female or even the colour of their hair. He turned his head to look at the crowd. If he was going to people watch, he was going to watch people he could actually see.

After a few minutes, Fitz was just about finished creating the entire scenario in his mind wherein he approached the attractive young blonde off to his right, held her rapt with his tales of daring and adventure across the universe, and took her off to have a few drinks which, he being so attractive and all, she would offer to pay for. After that, he would ask her to show him around town and, damn, off she went, apparently tired of waiting for something interesting to happen with the filming. She was not the only one.

'Something's wrong,' said the Doctor.

'Too right, something's wrong,' replied Fitz. 'We're standing around here when we could be doing something that might be engaging, exciting, or, heaven forbid, interesting.'

'Something's wrong with their line,' the Doctor added.

Fitz took another look up. He still could not make out anything other than coloured blobs in vaguely human form.

'How can you tell?' he asked the Doctor, but it was too late. The Doctor was already weaving through the crowd towards the building.

The entire area was bounded with yellow and black tape, 'Do Not Cross' in bold letters repeated over and over around the perimeter until looping back on itself, a weak ouroboros of warning. Respect for such flimsy barriers is conditioned in modern human consciousness, but has no equivalent in a Gallifreyan nervous system. The Doctor slipped under the ribbon without slowing down and ran towards the building's entrance.

It was in the Doctor's favour that all eyes, except

Fitz's, were focused on the dangling actors. He entered the building unnoticed.

The Doctor entered the lobby, several immediate concerns jockeying for place in his mind. He instantly dismissed the lifts as too slow, even if they were already positioned on the ground, a slim chance itself. He ran through the door marked stairs off to his right.

The Doctor leapt up the stairs two or three at the time, using the banisters to spin himself around to take the corners as fast as possible. The simple physical exertion of the moment allowed him the luxury of keeping his mind free to think through the possibilities and ramifications of what he had seen and what actions he could take once he reached the roof.

Upon finally exiting onto the roof, he was almost disappointed. No slavering aliens bent on world domination, emotionless robots ploddingly and meticulously eliminating their organic masters, there was just an unconscious stunt supervisor and two people hanging from a fraying fire hose. Scarcely a challenge.

Fitz made his way to the front of crowd, but that was as far as he was going to get. He lacked the Doctor's ability to flit through the gaps in people's attention. Still, the best he could manage to see was vaguely human blobs suspended from the roof. He noticed the man standing next to him had a pair of binoculars. Fitz politely enquired if he could use them briefly. The man with the binoculars not so politely replied that Fitz should employ his sexual prowess on his own person.

The level of noise the crowd was producing rose, triggered by the appearance of a tiny brown blob over the edge of the roof. Even unable to make out anything at this distance, Fitz knew who it probably, no, definitely was. The Doctor's head retracted out of view. Shortly thereafter, the people on the end of the line were reeled in and disappeared from view as well. Minutes passed as Fitz could feel the mood of the crowd pull in opposite directions. Many assumed the show was over and started to detach from the mass of spectators and drift away. Those left behind stared at the building with a growing anticipation.

Their anticipation was rewarded though, when the door opened and out came four figures. The first was a man, a huge man. The kind of man that made butchers wish cannibalism was legal. He had short blonde hair and a jaw that preceded him into a room. The white lab coat he wore did little to disguise his ability to crush lesser mortals. At his side was a woman. She had a couple of things that preceded her into a room, but they were only nominally a part of her. Also with blonde hair and in a lab coat, her tanned skin had the taut sheen of something over-inflated. Behind them, unnoticed, the Doctor was helping the fourth, injured, person out of the building.

Letting the injured man lean on his shoulder, the Doctor led him to the ambulance which stood waiting by the side of the building. This man has suffered a severe blow to the head,' said the Doctor. 'He may have a concussion. See to it that he's taken care of.'

At that moment, security finally took notice of the Doctor.

'Stop him,' shouted a guard and pointed at the Doctor. Two more guards stated to draw in on either side of the Doctor, ready to make a grab for him. They stopped when the big blonde man in the lab coat walked up to the Doctor and waved off the security guards.

'Relax, he's with me,' the man said. He had a deep voice with a faint, yet sill recognisable Teutonic accent. The Doctor muttered something and pointed to Fitz. The man walked towards Fitz, trailed by the Doctor. Great, thought Fitz, he's got some story or plot that I'm supposed to play along with, except he hasn't gone to the trouble to tell me about it yet.

'Fitz,' said the Doctor. 'This is Arnold. Arnold, this is my friend, Fitz.'

That's a reasonably uncomplicated cover story, thought Fitz as he shook Arnold's hand. Unlike most bodybuilder types Fitz had met, Arnold did not view a handshake as a good chance to test his hand crushing ability. Arnold smiled.

'Your friend here saved my life. Tiffany's too.' Arnold turned to face the Doctor. 'You know, you didn't tell me your name.'

'Ah, I'm the Doctor.'

'What a coincidence,' said Arnold, and he grinned even wider. 'So am I.'

Room 1117 is opulent, extravagant, and a lot of other words that ended with 'nt; It was built to meet the needs of the self-important, the nouveau riche, the pretentious, the celebrities. Fixtures, ordinary and/or unnecessary, had to be made of marble or gold or even gold-trimmed marble. Every day, room 1117 is cleaned by a team of three industrious, thorough, underpaid, illegal immigrants to the exacting specifications of the hotel management, ownership, and studio. Every day, between two and three o'clock, they sweep into the room and set about their appointed tasks. They dust. They polish the marble and gold. They strip the beds of their linens and replace them. They sterilise the lavatories and the kitchen. One of them vacuums the carpet until every fibre of the 3/4" white shag is pointing in the same north by northwest direction. Every day, between three and four o'clock, they leave the room, immaculate, behind them.

Tomorrow, they will enter the room, see what Fitz has done to it, and waste ten full minutes of their schedule hurling epithets that echo off the marble faced walls. But that is tomorrow.

'We're staying here, eh?' asked Fitz. He flopped onto the white pit sofa and sighed as he sank into the cushions. At least the air conditioning in the room afforded a break from the oppressive heat outside. It was so bad out there, he had been almost tempted to take off his jacket.

'Arnold said that we are free to use his hotel room as long as we are in town.' The Doctor produced a magnetic key card from nowhere with a flourish and flicked it expertly across the room to land on Fitz's chest. 'There's your key. I'll pick one up at the front desk later.'

'Which room is Arnold's?' asked Fitz. Though the suite was huge, there were only two bedrooms and he didn't much relish sleeping on the sofa, as comfortable as it was proving to be. It was the principle of the thing.

The Doctor, for his part, had failed to even look in Fitz's direction since they entered the room. Obviously distracted, he stalked about the room, fidgeting, picking up and examining every furnishing, painting, and knick-knack that wasn't affixed in place.

'Neither, Arnold is staying at his home, about 15 kilometres from the studio.'

'Then why is he paying for this suite?'

The Doctor halted in mid-step and finally faced Fitz to speak. 'He isn't. The studio is. It's part of his contract. One of the numerous demands he places on them to remind them of his importance.'

'That's ridiculous.'

'That's entertainment.'

Fitz vocalised a vague disparaging fricative and retracted farther into the cushions.

The Doctor sighed, exasperated. 'Honestly Fitz, you would have known all this if you had just ridden in the limo with Arnold and me. For some reason, you insisted on riding with Tiffany.'

'There were a couple of good reasons to ride with Tiffany,' Fitz defended.

'Really? What were they?' The Doctor stood, waiting for an answer. He was genuinely curious.

Fitz couldn't bring himself to tell the Doctor that both reasons were about six inches below Tiffany's chin.

'Never mind,' said Fitz. 'What are we going to do? What are we looking for?'

'It's simple really. There's only two things we need to do. First, find out who's trying to stop this movie from being completed. Second, I need to decide whether or not I should allow this movie to be completed.'

Fitz rose from the cushions to look the Doctor in the eye. He wasn't sure he had heard that last sentence correctly. 'Allow it to be completed? Who are you to decide?'

The Doctor grinned. 'Well, it is my life they're filming after all.'

The Doctor pocketed the key proffered to him by the clerk at the main desk and led Fitz out of the lobby, back into the glare of the California sun, where the limousine Arnold had arranged for them waited. It was the latest, hottest, biggest ride available, a stretch SUV. It was fitted out with everything, tinted windows, privacy screens, phone, fax, television, satellite dish, DVD, stereo, full bar, four-wheel drive, rifle rack, bike rack, ski rack, mud flaps, and more. Once inside, The Doctor coughed to draw Fitz's attention away from all this while the chauffeur stored the portable staircase needed to get inside.

'Yes?'

The Doctor stared out the window at the passing scenery. 'I'm meeting Arnold at the executive producers office, a Mr. Stellen. While I'm there, I'd like you to ask the prop director a few questions. What he's noticed on the set. Any tensions between people. Anything suspicious. I'll meet you at the commissary afterwards. Any questions?'

Fitz held up a bottle of Kirin. 'Have you seen a church key in here?'

Ronald Stellen was born to be a producer. He could not have been more suited to the job if he had been grown in a vat using the genetic material of Jon Peters and Albert Broccoli. Even though modern telecommunications technology allowed for multiple phone lines, that was not good enough for him. More phones conveys more lines of communication, more power, he would say. And get me a bigger TV while you're at it.

The Doctor was the last to arrive. Stellen tried very hard not to let any resentment he might have for the Doctor show. He might be wealthy, a potential investor.

'Hold my calls, I'm in a meeting,' he told his secretary for the others' benefit. His secretary was an intelligent woman. She knew damn well he wanted his calls held. As soon as the door to his office closed, she switched documents on her terminal and went back to work on the book chronicling his various peccadilloes and character flaws that she would sell for a half million dollars a year later.

'Hold my calls,' she mocked, and went back to work on the part about his Viagra dependency.

Inside the office, Stellen took his place behind his desk while, left to right, The Doctor, Arnold, and the director, Joel, sat down. They recounted the incident, Arnold told of the line stopping, the Doctor of the flights up the stairs and the rescue, Joel of not knowing what the hell was going on.

'Well,' said Stellen when they finished. 'That's very disturbing. Have the police found whoever's responsible?'

Joel shook his head. 'They don't have any idea who could have been in that building while we were shooting. They think the person responsible probably just slipped away through the crowd during all the confusion afterwards.'

'Until they find out who's responsible,' interjected the Doctor. 'You should suspend production on the picture. Next time, they might succeed.'

Stellen drew in a sharp breath. 'We can't do that Doctor. It would cost us millions. We have investors to think of.'

'At least have stunt men do the more dangerous scenes. Someone's trying to kill Arnold.'

Stellen held up a sign to silence them. 'Gentlemen, I will look into it. Now, I would like to talk to Joel in private. Arnold, I assure you that the studio will do everything possible to take care of you. Doctor, thank you again for saving the life of our star, here.' Stellen gave both the Doctor and Arnold a warmest, most genuine fake smile as they left the room.

This movie? This movie is bull-—. I worked on —-ing *"Star Wars,"* understand? I worked with -—ing George Lucas. This —- is bull-—. They spent all their -—ing money on Arnold and Tiffany and -—ing three martini lunches and —- and then they expect us to make this movie look like a —ing spectacular. This is bull-—.'

'They're paying him twenty-five million dollars, man. That would have looked -—ing great on the screen.'

'Yea, tell me about it. You could make a whole -—ing movie for what our two stars are getting. I'd call them actors, but my Mom brought me up not to lie.'

'What, are you supposed to be some kind of cop or something?'

'What's your name?'

'Okay, okay, that's cool. I didn't think so. I'll tell you what happened But I need to relax a little, know what I mean? Let some of this negativity building around this whole thing just ooze on out of me. You want some? No, go ahead, man. I wouldn't offer it if I didn't mean it. Christ, don't light it up in here. There's smoke detectors everywhere. California is a no smoking state, my friend. Come on, I'll show you where. Here we are. We've got shade. We've got privacy. We've got this.'

This job's pretty been pretty much like all the rest, one big throbbing mass of ego. Arnold's got his people. Tiffany's got her people. The studio's got their people. And the director, well, he's a director. What do you expect? Same —-, different day.'

'Fitz, this is —ing Hollywood, man. Everyone acts unusual. It's what they get paid for.'

'Besides the accountants? Heh. No, not really. It's actually been pretty boring; most of them are. Long days, setting things up, pulling them back down, again and again. The project may change, but I might as well be working on a -—ing production line for all the -—ing monotony.'

'Ah, I see what you're getting at now. I'm not in charge of that stuff. You want to talk to Patrick. He's the stunt co-ordinator. I can tell you this, though. I was there when he was loading his — on the truck. He did a final once over on everything before it was loaded. Nothing like that would have made it past him. Whoever —ed with that, equipment, —- ed with it at the location.'

'I've got no idea. Now quit bogarting that —ing thing and hand it over so I can have some.'

'Hello, this is Doctor Holloway's answering service. May I take a message?'

'Grace isn't in? Where is she?'

'I'm not allowed to give out that information, sir. Would you like to leave a message?' 'L.yes. If you could just let her know that the Doctor called and I would like to talk to her about -'

'Which doctor, sir?'

'What?'

'Which doctor, sir?'

'No, I'm not a witch doctor. I -'

'Which doctor are you, sir? Doctor Holloway works with many doctors. Which one are you?'

'Just the Doctor, she'll know which one. I need to talk to her about her book.'

A heavy sigh. 'And what number can she reach you at, sir?'

'I don't have the number with me. It's the Hollywood Hilton, room 1117. Okay, I'll be right there. I have to run. Hollywood Hilton, room 1117. It's very important that she contact me as soon as possible.'

'Yes sir. I'll see that she gets the message.'

'Thank you.' <click>

'Idiot.' <click>

Fitz clambered into the limousine, coughing. The Doctor, distracted, stared out the window. He was off in another world, figuratively speaking for once. They rode in a silence broken only by the rhythmic clacking of the doors locking and unlocking, due to the Doctor fidgeting with the controls on his seat's armrest. Fitz took advantage of his distraction by setting the land speed record for blinking in an effort to get his tear ducts working again. Finally, the Doctor broke the silence.

'The studio has decided to allow the expanded use of stunt men in the film,' said the Doctor, still staring out the window.

'Yeah?' Blink blink blink.

'Businessmen and accountants, more concerned with profit than life or death. I just don't understand you humans sometimes.'

'Right.' Blink blink blink. There they go. The saline was starting to flow. The burning subsided.

'Grace wasn't in,' said the Doctor. He opened his mouth to continue and halted, thinking the better of it. He turned to face Fitz just in time to watch a massive coughing jag. The Doctor's expression immediately changed to one of concern. He placed his hand on Fitz's back to steady him. 'Are you all right, Fitz? Is it the smog?'

Til be fine,' rasped Fitz, pulling himself up. 'Is there any food in here?'

'I believe so, in the cupboard to your right, but you may want to wait. We've been invited to take lunch with Arnold. We're on our way there now. After that, we're going to watch them film today's scenes.' While he talked, the Doctor opened the mini-icebox across from his seat and poured Fitz a glass of mineral water. He handed it to Fitz, adding, 'Did you find out anything?'

Fitz accepted the glass and gulped down the water eagerly. He recounted his conversation with the prop director, with a little judicious editing, for the Doctor.

The Doctor, for his part, just listened attentively and nodded.

When Fitz and the Doctor reached the studio, they were directed to a pair of folding metal chairs set up to the rear of the room, out of the crew's way. Apart from the two of them, there were no visitors to the set, another one of Arnold's contract stipulations. The Doctor scanned the room, taking in every detail. When he caught someone's eye, he smiled at them while committing their face to memory. There was no telling who could have made the attempt on the lives of the actors.

Joel led a tall thin man dressed in black robes over to meet the visitors.

'Doctor, Fitz, this is Jeremy, our villain. He's fantastic, really. Once an audience hears that cold British accent they...' Joel's voice trailed off as he noticed the look on the combined faces of the Doctor, Fitz, and Jeremy. 'I'm, I, I have to go take a look, over there.' He pointed over his shoulder while taking a backward step. 'At the camera, before we, urn, start. I'll do that now.'

'Pleased to meet you,' said Jeremy, briefly shaking the Doctor and Fitz's hands before glancing towards the set. 'I'd like to go over this scene with the other two one last time before we start shooting. If you'll excuse me.' Jeremy joined the other actors behind the set where they could practice in relative peace.

The Doctor took the opportunity to try and press Fitz to remember more details of his conversation with the prop director. Fitz's impaired short-term memory, however, had yielded all it was ever going to of that conversation. The Doctor told Fitz to pay more attention to detail in any future interviews. He seemed to Fitz to be unusually peevish. Then again, he was the one having his life put on public display.

The actors came from back stage and took their marks. Arnold and Tiffany both looked over to the Doctor and Fitz and waved. Filming began.

127. INT-TASM CONTROL ROOM

> The TASM Control Room is white, brilliant white. A pale blue sphere in the centre of the room pulses with the energy necessary to

keep the black hole at bay. DOCTOR CHRONOS is chained to a column by heavy iron chains. He's facing the power source. MASTER E-VOL enters with POSSESSED TIFFANY.

MASTER E-VOL

You were right, Doctor Chronos. I will turn this planet inside out. By midnight tonight, everything you have will be mine, your body, your ship, and your woman.

MASTER E-VOL grabs POSSESSED TIFFANY and gives her a long slow kiss

DOCTOR CHRONOS

(screaming) Nooooo.

They filmed the scene again and again, at least ten times. Fitz wondered how Arnold kept from losing his voice, the amount of bellowing that was required of him. Finally, Joel appeared satisfied with the latest take and called for a short break. The actors relaxed and Arnold drifted over to the Doctor and Fitz.

'Not as exciting as you'd think, hm?' Arnold asked.

Fitz found it easy to agree. He had nearly fallen asleep sitting in his chair.

'Want to come to the screening room? I'll show you some of the rushes.'

92. EXT-HIGHWAY FRONTING EXHIBIT HALL

DOCTOR CHRONOS and TIFFANY run from the EXHIBIT HALL. They approach a MOTORCYCLE COP and attempt to steal his cycle. MOTORCYCLE COP turns and pulls his gun on DOCTOR CHRONOS and TIFFANY.

DOCTOR CHRONOS

Officer, the continued existence of your planet requires the use of your motorcycle.

MOTORCYCLE COP

Of course it does, buddy. I'm going to phone for back-up so we can give you a full police escort.

MOTORCYCLE COP reaches for the radio on his cycle. DOCTOR CHRONOS steps in and grabs the gun from the MOTORCYCLE COP. DOCTOR CHRONOS knocks the MOTORCYCLE COP unconscious with a blow to the head with the butt of the gun. DOCTOR CHRONOS pockets the gun.

DOCTOR CHRONOS

(looking over his shoulder at TIFFANY while getting on the motorcycle) It's not serious. Trust me, I'm a doctor.

As the lights came up, Fitz's mouth hung open. He had to think to close it when he saw Arnold approaching them from the front rows of the screening room. He turned to see the Doctor sitting next to him, still transfixed by the screen, as if the film was still running. He had the kind of appalled look on his face that was usually caused by witnessing the mistreatment of living beings.

'What do you think?' Arnold asked.

'Urn, it's...' Fitz hesitated.

'That's not it,' yelled the Doctor. He shot out of his seat and headed for the screening room door. 'That's not how it happened at all.'

Fitz was out of his seat just in time to see the Doctor fling the door open and stalk out, the tails of his coat flapping behind him. Fitz followed the Doctor to the studio. Arnold followed Fitz. One of Arnold's entourage followed Arnold.

The Doctor reached the studio and flitted around the studio, moving chairs, sifting through the contents of tabletops, opening drawers and boxes, until his eyes caught sight of the item for which he searched. He grabbed the script off the table where Tiffany had earlier discarded it. He opened it to the first page and started reading. The longer he read, the faster he turned the pages and the more his face stretched in an expression of horror. This isn't the way it happened,' he muttered. 'This isn't it at all.'

He rolled the script up and stalked to where Joel stood talking to a gaffer.

'Who wrote this?' the Doctor asked, doing his best to keep his temper hidden and failing. 'I need to speak to him.'

'Excuse me?'

'Where's the writer?' the Doctor demanded, waving the rolled up script in front of him. 'The person who wrote this script?'

Joel emitted a short snort. 'Writer? We don't let writers on the set.'

The Doctor did not speak for the entire ride back to the hotel room. He sat with his arms folded, glowering out the window. The only break in his mood came when the desk clerk handed the Doctor a message. Grace had called for him. Unable to wait until they reached their hotel room, the Doctor went off to find a phone in the lobby. He told Fitz that they could meet in the room later.

Fitz tried hard not to get some enjoyment out of the Doctors predicament. He liked the Doctor. They were best friends. They had saved each others' lives. It just wasn't right. The lift doors closed and the wall that he maintained for the entire limo ride crumbled. He burst out laughing. He laughed until the muscles in his abdomen cramped. Schadenfreude 1 The Right Thing 0.

'Hello, it's Grace. If you want me to get back to you, leave your name and number after the beep.'

<beep>

'Grace, Grace, if you're there, please pick up. This movie they're making from your book. It's... you've got to come here. We have to stop this. I'm at the Hollywood Hilton, room 1117.'

<click>

Fitz yawned again. For the entire ride from the hotel to the studio he had either been yawning or nodding off in his seat. The Doctors agitated pacing had sounded like a soft shoe metronome for the entire night. Between the noise and the general air of tension that filled the suite, Fitz had managed to get somewhere under three hours worth of sleep.

They had only been in Hollywood for three days and two nights, barely a long weekend, and Fitz was already tired of the place. Tired of the heat and sitting in studios and offices and macrobiotic lunches and bottled water and no smoking and iced tea. He wished that whoever was responsible for their involvement would hurry up and try again so this would end. So he could leave. Fitz realised he was wishing for someone to attempt murder and a flash of guilt wiped the thought from his mind.

156. INT-TIFFANY'S LIVING ROOM (cont'd)

DOCTOR CHRONOS

Why don't you come with me? See the universe. I can have you back here before you even left.

TIFFANY

I can't. Why don't you come with me?

DOCTOR CHRONOS

I don't mind if I do.

DOCTOR CHRONOS grabs TIFFANY and kisses her passionately. He pushes her onto the sofa, rips her shirt off, and clutches her chest to his face, as we FADE TO CREDITS.

- THE END-

After expending no small amount of effort during the past three days staring at Tiffany, Fitz was surprised how quickly he became bored of watching her roll around half-naked with Arnold. The heat of the lights and the cramp spreading through the small of his back from sitting in a cheap metal chair were not doing anything to improve his mood, either.

The Doctor's mood, as it had tended to be lately, was worse.

After the first take of the scene, Fitz had leaned over to the Doctor and whispered, 'Did you really do that?' Just trying to get a reaction.

The Doctor did not reply. Fitz could swear that he heard the sound of sizzling emanating from the Time Lord's cranium.

Again and again, long periods of standing around, chatting, grabbing a quick drink or snack or smoke punctuated by a shout, a clack and a minute or two of concentration on the entire crew's part. Fitz felt his eyelids drooping, his body slumping.

The Doctor had evidently reached the point where he could not even look at the set. His eyes wandered the soundstage, looking over cameras, cables, monitors, rafters, anything but the set.

Eleven takes later and Arnold and Tiffany were at it again, snogging away, two well- oiled, over-inflated chests pressed together.

After a couple of hours of being repeatedly, though not deliberately, insulted, the Doctor can not watch the action anymore. He glances at the digital cameras, one by one, instantly committing to memory their placement, the angle they are recording, the face of their operator, and so on. He closes his eyes, remembering other filmings he was lucky enough to attend. Buster's antics between takes. Marilyn's smile. The stare Stanley had given him when he tried to argue that Pan Am would no longer exist by the time that year came to pass.

The cameras make a barely perceptible whirr as they record. The Doctor misses the clacking sound of the old cameras; it somehow makes it less romantic. He opens his eyes and their gaze drifts to the ceiling, across the rafters, past the figure holding the...

The Doctor sprang from his seat and ran towards Arnold and Tiffany. 'Stop. Get out of there,' he yelled.

This is it, thought Fitz, he's finally snapped. Reliving bits of your own past was bad enough, but seeing them like this had to be too much for anyone, even the Doctor. He followed the Time Lord, trying to reach him before the members of the crew did. They probably would not take too kindly to having their work interrupted.

The Doctor easily outran Fitz, something that Fitz would rather chalk up to a head start and superior alien biology instead of low endurance, poor physical shape and nicotine soiled lungs. The members of the crew closed in around him, but the Doctor somehow wove his way through gaps that couldn't be seen in a flurry of brown hair and green coattails. The crew were left behind, wondering where he disappeared to for a couple of seconds before turning around. By that time, it was too late.

The Doctor rushed the stage, eyes wide, still screaming, 'Move. Quick.'

Arnold and Tiffany took off, more in fear of the oncoming madman than the instructions he was bellowing. The Doctor veered off to the right and dove behind the bed, covering the back of his head with his hands, just as the light fell from the ceiling and smashed into the bed.

The room was silent, as if the crash had driven all other noise from the room. Everyone stopped and stared at the pile of debris lying in the centre of the bed, its centre bowed from the force of the impact. The Doctor rose into view, brushing the fragments of glass, metal and wood off of his clothes.

'Fitz,' he said quietly, 'let's go to the airport.'

'I realise that we're in the future and I'm not that familiar with the money here, but isn't ten dollars a bit much for a cup of coffee?'

The Doctor waved off Fitz's question without taking his eyes off the entrance. Fitz wasn't in the mood to press the question, either. It wasn't as if he was paying for it. He removed the lid from the paper cup and sipped. It wasn't just expensive coffee, it was bad expensive coffee.

An hour earlier, after a wordless ride to LAX, the Doctor had led Fitz into the lobby of Terminal 5, uttering a single name. 'Stellen,' he had said.

'The studio man you met? What about him?'

The Doctor scanned the lobby, looking for a low traffic spot with a field of vision that would allow him to watch the doors. He found a spot by the metal detectors and took up his post, Fitz at his side.

'I saw him, in the rafters of the studio carrying the lighting fixture. He was already high on my list of likely suspects, so it wasn't too terrible a surprise.'

'Why was he already a suspect?' asked Fitz.

A frayed rope during a stunt shoot? It obviously wasn't one of the creative staff. It showed a complete lack of originality. Perfect for a studio executive. Do you realise he had to carry that light fixture up into the rafters? There weren't any there, so he actually carried one up. A method of murder conditioned into him by years of television and movies. Terrible.' The Doctor shook his head slowly like he was reminiscing about a relative sent to an asylum.

Fitz tried to show the same dedication as the Doctor, standing by the metal detectors, staring intently at the doors. But it wasn't long before he was slouching against the nearest wall, then his eyes started drifting around the room to the ticket counters and the line of people passing through the metal detectors, until finally he couldn't take any more and he went to buy the ten dollar cup of bad coffee.

'Keep your eye on the doors,' muttered the Doctor and he walked off. Fitz wanted to obey the Doctor but he couldn't help but divide his time between the door and following the Doctor as he approached the nearest security guard.

The door opened and in walked a tall pretty blonde in a white frock unfortunately accompanied by a handsome well-dressed man. The Doctor talked to the security guard and brought his left wrist up, pointing at it. A trio of nuns strolled in, dragging wheeled suitcases behind them. Why do there always seem to be nuns at airports? The security guard looked at his watch, and replied to the Doctor. A clutch of businessman, carry-ons slung over their shoulder, bustled through the doors, trying to race each other to be first in line at the ticket counter without breaking into a run. The Doctor grinned and shook the guards hand. As he turned to leave, he tripped over his own feet and the guard helped him up.

'What was that all about?' asked Fitz as the Doctor returned.

'Just checking on the time,' the Doctor said.

'I thought you carried a pocket watch?'

'I do. Stay here. I'm going to wait closer to the door. He might try to leave if he sees you.'

The Doctor walked to the entry and picked a support pillar by the door to wait behind. They did not have to wait much longer. The door opened and admitted Stellen, a large duffel bag his sole luggage.

The Doctor slipped from behind the pillar and deftly transferred the bag onto his own shoulder before Stellen could register its absence.

'Help you with your luggage, sir?' the Doctor muttered. He steered the shocked executive to where Fitz stood waiting.

'What are you -'

'I suggest you keep your voice down, Mr. Stellen. You might attract more attention than you desire.' The Doctor lowered the bag to the floor, careful to keep Fitz and himself between it and Stellen.

Stellen deflated; he looked close to breaking out sobbing.

'What does it matter anyway? You're here to turn me in.'

'No, we're not,' said the Doctor.

Both of the other men turned to him in shock.

'We're not?' asked Fitz in disbelief. He could not believe he had spent over an hour standing around in an airport foyer for nothing.

'No, we're not,' the Doctor repeated. 'Mr. Stellen is going to turn himself in.'

'I am?'

'Of course you are. You know that the authorities will catch up with you sooner or later and the punishment is going to be a great deal more severe if you run. The choice is yours, pay for your crimes now or pay more later. I don't see why I need to interfere.'

The longer the Doctor talked, the more Stellen seemed to regain his composure. By the end, he stood smiling at the Time Lord. Fitz could see where this was headed and felt the need to delay the inevitable just a little bit longer.

'Why did you do it anyway?' asked Fitz.

'Why?' Stellen's smile instantly disappeared, replaced with an expression of disgust. 'I inherited that loser project from Daniels. It was his bright idea to reunite Arnold and Akiva and Joel. Like there was any —ing chance that the film would break even. I was as good as fired, ten months after I got promoted, for a project that wasn't even my idea. And you can't cancel it, cause if you piss off Arnold, you're as good as fired anyway. My only shot was to try to get someone else to cancel it, or make it impossible to finish.'

'If it's any consolation, I don't think it will get finished now,' said the Doctor.

Stellen gave a short laugh. 'No, it's no consolation and you're right, I don't see why you should interfere either. So if you're so confident that I'll get caught anyway, hand me my bag. I'll take my chances.'

The Doctor reached behind, grabbed the bag, and returned it to Stellen.

Stellen smirked at them, then turned and walked to the metal detectors. The Doctor made no move to stop him.

'It's time we left,' said the Doctor, quietly. He held up a hand to quiet Fitz when the young man tried to argue. The Doctor motioned for Fitz to follow him and walked to the doors. As the Doctor's hand touched the door handle, an alarm sounded behind them followed by the sounds of the scuffle. Fitz turned and saw Stellen being wrested to the ground by airport security.

'Wait, what's going on?'

'I imagine they found the guard's gun that I planted in his bag. Time to go, Fitz. We're nearly finished here.'

Q: Which bring us to your lost picture, *Masters of Time.* It had a huge amount of publicity, an all-star cast, and then production just stopped. Do you think the public will ever get to see it?

(Arnold shifts in his seat, obviously uncomfortable talking about this subject. The gag order in the settlement probably helped.)

A: We never completed shooting. It doesn't exist in any form fit for screening.

Q: Any thoughts on going back and finishing it? Filming those last few scenes?

A: All footage and props and rights were bought by a private collector. Anyone wanting to finish the movie would have to get in touch with him and I understand he's very reclusive.

'Don't you think dropping it all into the sun was a bit, oh, over the top?' asked Fitz. The entire roof of the TARDIS was given over to a panoramic display of the solar surface in all its glory, adjusted so they could look at it without burning out their retinas, of course.

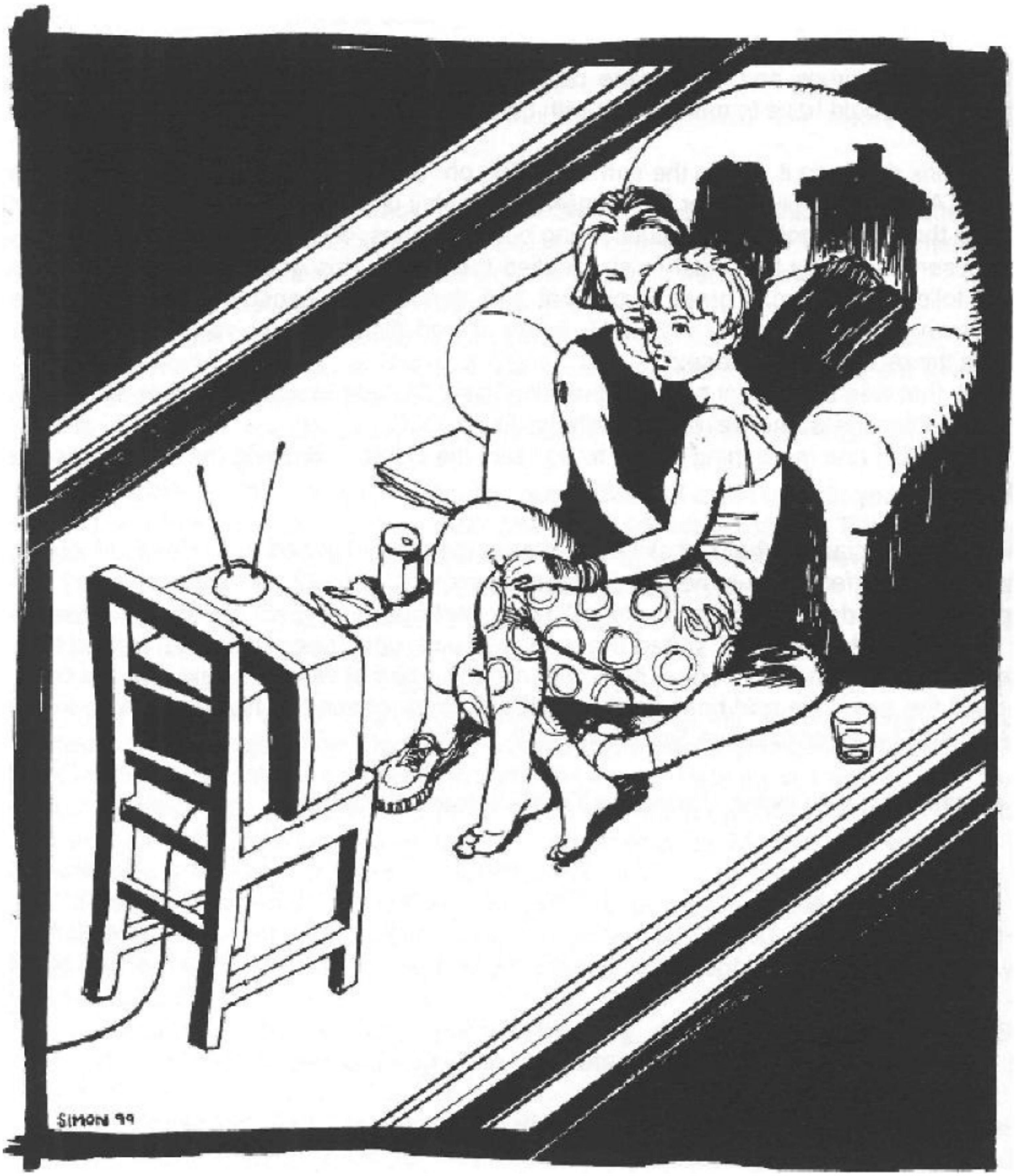
'It deserved a truly theatrical finish,' replied the Doctor, his good cheer restored. His eyes had followed the small green circle that had denoted the capsule through its entire descent down the star's gravity well until, finally, it had flickered and vanished. 'Besides, sometimes things survive the vortex.'

'Well, that was a pleasant enough diversion,' said Fitz. He ignored the glare directed at him by the Doctor. 'I assume we're done with this little affair.'

'There's just one more thing I need to do,' said the Doctor, adjusting the controls on the console.

The sharp metallic clack of the mail slot door interrupted Akiva. He had been deep in thought, trying to find the perfect word in his current screenplay - *taut* or *pert?* He hit the save key and shuffled to the front door to gather the mail. A small package in a brown mailing envelope sat amidst the letters. He opened it, pulled the book out, and, upon seeing the title, looked for a letter or a note inside the envelope. There was none, no hint of who had sent him the book. He dropped the envelope and book on the sideboard and returned to his office. Who would have sent him *The Art of Creative Screenwriting?*

'That's a wrap,' said the Doctor, closing the TARDIS door behind him.


SIMON 99

'Fangrrl Life'
By
Phil Pascoe

Live a little

The tav's a safe place. Well, as safe as you can get without renaming it a bar, buying a mirror-ball, and painting the walls pink. And, of course, there's only one reason why I drop these clichés so easily.

The others know the situation, read my, urn, vibe. I sit at the table nearest the bar, order a guarana and cola. One time someone even asked to borrow the empty seat beside me. Took it to another table.

Like any other Thursday fortnight, I'm sitting here, alone, in a bar full of warrior princesses, byker chicks, even one or two grrls wearing long multi-coloured scarves. Talking. To each other.

Shell and Cate, chatting at the bar, just avoiding my avoiding them. They're out and proud, and really do radiate a friendly presence around tavern. And maybe it's a small sign of progress, when they burst out laughing, holding each other's - waists - as they share a joke, I don't stare at my knees in embarrassment. Well, not right away.

Okay, I glance away, to my left, because it is silly to get uncomfortable, I mean I'm here, aren't I and -

Oh.

I see her.

...she's humming with the music from the radio,
indie rhythms sampling highs highs highs

'Hi,' she says.

I'm still looking at, of all things, her hair. 'Helio' would be the normal reply, but - her hair. Blonde, no dye, no highlights. A really rich blonde. But now, she tilts her head slightly, wondering why I haven't replied, and blonde shimmers like heat haze - green, purple, orange -

'Hi,' she smiles. 'I was wondering if you'd like to talk, share a drink, sell me your 'zine?'

Off the hair, back on track. I look her in the eyes, because, knowing what comes next, I might as well be straight with her. I've rehearsed it enough times in front of the mirror. 'Listen, I'm waiting for someone, so -'

And then I *look* her in the eyes.

'Jess,' I tell them. Her. Then: 'Well, if the creature in the Mutant Enemy logo isn't a zombie, what is it, exactly?'

Oh. She's laughing. I'm laughing too.

...not humming with the music, there's another tune here, and the radio's off anyway

Cate and Shell have headed for a corner, so we (and yes, I'm insanely optimistic, saying we) have the bar area more or less to ourselves. I could have sworn, last glance, quick because I'm so busy taking in this woman, the fangrrls were grinning. About me. With me?

'I haven't been here before,' she mentions, little lovely breath of hesitation, then, 'but I've seen worse places to spend an evening. And I kind of like being around - this kind of people.'

Uh-oh. 'This kind of?'

She keeps speaking though. 'That sense of community, belonging, creativity, life. All built around something as magical as a television show. And no one to say you can't be happy with that. Or that I can't be - myself.'

'I, uh,' - oh - 'I guess I get the same buzz, keep coming here so I can, well, it's only a few train stops away, and the same familiar faces make you welcome, even though they've got knobbly foreheads.'

Turning on her stool, cradling her drink, she looks around the room. Each time she sees some new little huddle of fangrrls she smiles, and does that head tilt. The dim ceiling light reflecting off her bangs are sending me insane. Which means I tune out, not taking in her barstool sociology, apart from the texture of her voice, until she mentions her 'male friend.'

Oh. Stupid stupid.

...touching her shoulder and she's still... humming?

'I think, well, I haven't really thought this though very well, actually,' I stammer. She leans back over the bar for a refill. I have a moment to try and work out what I'm doing, what the hell she thought this was, and most crucially, how I get myself out of this, asap.

There's a sudden uproar from across the tav. Some grrls have got the karaoke machine going. The blonde woman turns my way to see what the noise is about, so I'm going to say it now, to her face. Eyes, damn, to her, help, chest. Argh. Focus. 'I should go.'

'Jess,' she says. 'I'm sorry. It's really not how it sounds.' Leaning forward slightly, she rests her fingers on mine. I grip my glass that much tighter it could shatter. 'When I said I lived with him,' she goes on, 'it's long-term, in a way 'long-term' can't really explain. But I wouldn't be here if that was going to last forever, would I?'

This time I grin before she does.

> *...she's warm, warm, except this one part of her back, near the base of her neck - feel it and there's this rough skin, and wandering, wondering what it is (and for a moment the humming stops)*

A little later, we've been talking. We. Talking. Isn't it wonderful? A spot has been turned on the karaoke, the main lights dimmed. Everyone's jostling over the mike, so I have this woman to myself.

We're in semi-shadow now, but there's still the UV skirting around the bar-top. Her hair reads this as fluffy whites and pinks.

'I guess I knew,' telling her, 'I mean, really, in year twelve. I was having a pretty rough time. My dog got sick, exams. When stress bunny goes feral. And one afternoon we'd had swimming for Phys Ed, then we were getting changed, and well, then -'

She runs a finger down her glass. The trails of moisture break into lots of little trails. The droplets take different trips, at various speeds and directions, to the surface of the bar.

'And then you knew,' she finishes.

'Actually, about half an hour later. I had maths, with Mrs. Silverman. Ms. Silverman. Then I knew.'

'So it's been difficult?'

'Difficult? Yeah, I reckon.'

She eye contacts me now, puppy-tilting. She looks so, well not sad (lost?) when she asks:

'How difficult?'

...it's a tattoo, must have hurt, but she takes my hand away from there and then - oh. so now we're both

humming

The opening bars are a blessed distraction. This woman's thrown me so far from 'shy' and 'intense', I need something to bring me back to geekdom. And no matter where I am, absolutely wherever, when I hear this song I move. It's got me odd looks frequently enough in shopping centres.

She notices my feet tapping against the barstool.

'This,' I explain, 'is probably Shell seeing if she can bring me out of my, er, shell.' Sounding desperate, because I really want to change the subject right now. 'It's so crass and early nineties, but doesn't it make you want to get up and dance?'

She looks over at the karaoke set-up, and the arguments over whose turn it is on the microphone, and I'm not even going to start to describe what her hair is doing now. But she lets herself smile again. I guess she's realised I don't want to talk about -

'Why dance,' she asks, brightly, 'when you can sing?'

And she's hopping up on the little stage area, and being handed the microphone by Leah, and I stop toe-tapping, because she's up there, singing that song. Don't think I've stopped moving though. Cate looks at her, then me, then at Shell.

I can't do this. I've been coming here every second Thursday for months, but I still have one foot, and let's face it, most of the rest of me, 'in'. And this, this would be then end of what I am now and the start of something new and frightening and. Oh. And with her blue eyes to watch me.

'Besides,' I tell myself as I empty my glass, 'I wouldn't be here if I didn't want someone to get into my anorak.' As I walk across the room and into the crowd, and everyone is laughing, hey, no, cheering.

And I sing.

> *...she's stopped humming again now, asleep, around me, holding me, and I sleep too (but not alone)*

Next morning, but the sun's glaring too brightly for me to make out the display of my alarm clock. The heat through the window is enough to tell me to get up for a glass of water, at least, and then probably several million aspirin. I sit up, feel nothing on my back. Which is normal, sure, I don't wear anything in bed. But, oh.

Oh.

She's crouching on the floor, other side of the bed, finding her boots. Almost fully dressed, but her blouse is still hanging open.

'Jess,' she says, when she realises I'm watching, 'It's about the guy I'm with. Living, travelling with. It's really, really long term.'

She's leaving. She's leaving, and in the sun light, the heat, her hair is just blonde. Dull, functional, yellow grey. Silhouetted, I can't see her eyes.

'You're uh, going back to him?' I'm trying really hard to work my way back to coherence.

'Yes,' she says, making the full stop painfully audible. 'I'm still going back, it's not my choice to make. I enjoyed - I'm really sorry we can't - Are you alright? Here.'

I don't take the hanky. I hate myself for this little bit of spite, but in my state who can blame me?

'I come from a culture so different to yours, Jess. For one thing, 'culture' is probably too limited a term to describe it. I'm trying to say, if I don't go back - he'll come and get me. There are rules.'

She turns herself around, sitting on the bed, as she puts on her shoes. I'm hardly listening, because I'm looking right into her lower neck. I can see the tattoo now, well the top of it. But she continues:

'I want to explain, Jess. To be who I'm becoming, I have to choose from the narratives available to me. And him. He's been parsing the old romantic set-pieces lately, although he hasn't seemed to catch anyone yet.' She frowns. 'Though, of course, he always writes me into his stories. Part of his continuity, even if for a moment when he's not looking I can be here with you.

'Of course,' and she's smiling now, with her shoulders at least, 'in the life he and I lead time is hardly an issue. Except -'

'Except what?' Beyond sleepy-headedness, on the edge of pleading.

'Except when it is,' beat, 'time.'

I lie back into my pillows. She's doing up her blouse now, so I guess this is it. All I can think about is how stupid I was to think that this, and 'this' could mean anything from this scene to my whole bloody life, could work. Back now, Jess. Back to the cliches and dropped hints and -

No.

'Listen, I don't know what life with him is like,' I insist, 'but why should what we've been end with him? Rewrite the story. Rewrite him, his life, his rules, his schedule. We sang, drank, tipped ice on Miki's head. We laughed. Did, does he, urn, make you happy?'

She sits quite still for a long second. Then she turns, leaning across the bed towards me. I don't pull back. I look straight into her sad, blue eyes, and I'm not going to look away.

'No,' she says, and kisses me.

Getting into it. Didn't spend that much time kissing last night, as such. I think we were giggling too hard. But we're kissing now, and her lips are - humming, and I touch her arms and they're - humming too.

She's still kissing me, and then I'm humming with her, when there's a sound like a car crash or a heart breaking and then she's gone.

My bedroom's empty. She's left. The door's still closed. So is the window. In the mirror across the room, a luminous blue residue is all that's left of her presence. The colour sparks then fades.

...later last night I did get up, for a pee, careful not to wake her as I slid out from under her arm. when I came back there she was, In my bed. I didn't know what to feel then, I still don't...

I tip-toed around the bed, and saw the covers had drifted down off her back... the tattoo was there, barely visible In the glow-in-the-dark of her hair, but It was words, written so precisely... It's hard to believe a tattoolst managed It... the words were as blue as her eyes, and yes shell I am going to tell you what It said, as If you'd know what they meant.

'Police Telephone. Free for use of public.'

Pull to open.

Seven months (and two and a half dates) later

'Jess,' Leah says, snapping me back to the present. 'I told you last week, didn't I, about the offer?' She pushes baby tomatoes onto her fork with the flat of her knife. Two, three at a time.

'Yeah,' I mumble, as she slides the tomatoes between her teeth. Two, three at a time. Chew, take a sip, swallow. And again.

'Oh, it's great,' she grins. 'I've been so busy lately at work, case files after hours, I've had no time to work out where I'm going. Then, bang, Nicholas asks me to join his new firm.' Has she been growing her nails? Yes: they scuff against her cutlery. 'It's just, wow.'

She mentions some stuff about pay-rises and positions, and there's a breathless rundown on how the head of the DPP warmed to her at a recent function. How this new job is the arse-kick into a Leah-shaped hole in success.

And you know what? Happy for her. Excited, even - I mean, she's going somewhere, and deserves it, after slaving over admin and the other stuff her colleagues couldn't be bothered even delegating. Up and up, into such a boy's club.

So why doesn't this feel empowering? For me, I mean.

'When you start, uh, you know,' and I look her straight for once, 'you're taking the offer, right?'

She grins, splutters giggling into her wine. 'Yeah, well, this is a real oncer, and I think I might just have a chance at it. Yeah, hi, two coffees, thanks.'

'I'll have a mineral water, actually.' The waiter heads away. Leah frames an apology on her lips, but I wave it off. I'm fine, I've told her repeatedly, the specialist just said take it easy, avoid - hey, I stop myself, because I don't remember changing the subject.

'That new office development in the western suburbs, that's got class written all over it - now you'll be able to imitate *The Practice* with, well, even less credibility.'

She grins, chews on a toothpick. 'No, fell through. Deposit was too high.'

Not to sound to casual, because, well, hardly - but phew! If Leah had moved, and we were going to keep seeing each other, it is a hell of a commute to Claremont, and could I afford the western suburbs lifestyle? Before you know it we'd be insisting we stay in touch, friends, that can't end. But - she's staying, we're staying. Cool.

'Anyway, I want to go further than Claremont,' she says, as the waiter slips the bill under her coffee, 'So the firm's moving to Melbourne.'

Oh

Wondered when I was going start saying that again.

'Jess, people are looking at us.'

But I hold my head 'like that' still, staring at the tabletop. And not at her. Like it's my fault, which maybe it is for not realising sooner, and I'm self-flagellation grrl, not letting myself take a, hell, a last look, at the person I've only just told Mum about, because I wanted to wait until I was sure that this time it wouldn't just be coffee -

Stupid but, maybe, I think in this argument, Mum's been right. Can't work out. Always ends like this.

Romantic moment. She leaves, I stay. Alone.

I cover my eyes with my palms.

'You agree, you said it,' Leah says quietly. 'I can't stay where I am, I have to take the job, and do it now. You understand.'

Yeah, my head's filling with reasons, rational arguments. Because I've practised this situation before, rehearsed the possibilities. Even though it was my fantasy we always ended up saying goodbye.

I can't argue now, make a scene, put the little drama in my head into real-time. I just keep staring at the table, picking at the worn edge of the tablecloth.

'We can still' - she pauses, working out that 'be friends' doesn't help - 'go to Tav next week. I mean, the application still has to go through. Must post it.[1] She reaches into her bag to check it's there. 'Oh, just remembered.'

And she pulls something out of her bag, slides it across, into my view. Her birthday present.

'Oh,' I say.

The spine isn't even creased.

Moments later, in the bathroom, head over the basin, because I couldn't reach a cubicle, and there goes lunch. Damn king prawns, upsetting my stomach. Must have been, couldn't be anything to do with what just happened.

Denial helps me cope, when these relationships of mine get punctuated.

Protect me, mundanity. Quarter past one. The minute hand ticks on to sixteen past - wait, back to fourteen. No, sixteen. Blurred eyes, how did that happen?

Like hell I'm going to Tav. Stay home, except, of course, she has to come by eventually to get her things. Damn.

Feel like staying here for a while. I pick a cubicle and sit. That soon becomes too much hassle, and I slump forward, clutching my stomach.

'Pull for autobiography.' Underneath the toilet roll dispenser.

No upchuck left, but my body gets the message: void anything. Anything Leah and I had together. Get it all out. 'Purge!' like she yells at thin girls in the park.

The spine wasn't even *creased.*

Could I stop now, for a bit?

I come out (ha ha) and Leah isn't there. I try to finish my water, but the waiter tells me my 'friend' already paid, and other customers are waiting to be seated.

'Okay,' I say, wiping some gunk off my cheeks. 'Just let me get my things together.' And I pick up the present - it's a good read. She'd have enjoyed it, if she'd given it a chance. Hell, shouldn't let myself get away with such obvious projection.

I'm not facing the right way, when she says, 'Jess, I'm sorry.'

This time she's gonna get it. I didn't just shit myself so she could have time to be sensitive and caring. The rehearsed arguments are long forgotten, but a barrage of obscenities seems a good start.

> I turn, and look her in the - 'You think you can
> just - oh -'

My heart races, and it's nothing to do with over-caffeination.

'You're upset,' *she* says, 'and I don't want to do this when you're hurt and vulnerable.' Her *hair Wke* white wine. 'I'll come back at a more appropriate time.'

I grab her and kiss hard.

And, breathe, then again, harder. She takes a surprised step back. The customers waiting to be served, and the waiter, boggle. But I don't care, and she doesn't either, going by the way she puts her arms around my head.

We stagger, stumble, dancing across the restaurant, joined at the mouths. Between the tables, around the chairs. Towards the salad bar slash smorgasbord.

Probably a good thing the waiter chooses now to throw us out.

Three weeks holiday from denial

I'm drying my hair when she starts rummaging through my medicine cabinet. Uh-oh. Is she still gonna like me after finding that old tube of cream? This is what I'm thinking.

She yawns, tries to rub the tiredness out of her face. Pads across the bathroom. 'Hey, back soon, get some rest. If that isn't another quaint human thing you've not quite got yet.'

'Sure, but,' she grins, 'I'm enjoying learning.'

'Oh, me too,' I say, pulling on an old radlesofem t-shirt, 'like the thirty-one words for time and relative dimensions in snow.'

She's sitting on the loo, ankles crossed, hair tousled and greenish.

'Yeah,' I continue, 'small thing you left out. Who are you?' She laughs, but I'm persistent. 'You do have names... where you come from?'

'No,' she says eventually.

'Don't want to give yourself one?'

She just shrugs, with a slight smile.

Later, in bed, I wonder what he called her. Had called her.

''Old girl', most of the time,' she murmurs, after some consideration.

'Patronising bastard.'

'I could never really be anything more than what he needed me to be. Defined so totally by living with him.' I pull her close. 'But now I'm something more. Jess' grrlfriend,' she says, as our bodies share the warmth, 'Call me that, I like it;

'Gently now, gently. Hey, too fast.'

'Sorry, how's this.'

'Oh, that's good, yeah. Now where's that - oh, use it, wow.'

'How's that, is that enough?'

'Just... just a bit more. Mmm, yeah, fantastic. You're getting great at this.'

'I'm not finished yet, grrl. Bring that over here and I'll put this in. Bit more?. You like? You do like!'

'Urn, d'you think he'd follow you? What, you don't like that?'

'The smell's putting me off. Hmm, him? Maybe, but he'd have a long trip to get here.'

'But, isn't he a function of the universe, or a god? Oh no, you can't put that in. My allergies. At the very least he could be watching us on some, heh heh, time television, or something.'

She grins, turns to an imaginary camera. 'Well, Doctor,' she says, 'this part of the broadcast is really meant to make your mouth water.'

'I'll put this in the oven for fifteen, then,' I laugh.

'With this token, I commit to live with you, and love you, for as long as we are together,' Cate says. 'Wear it, as I wear the token you've given me, as a representation, to our gathered friends, and ourselves, that we two together are as one.'

Shell repeats this, and they exchange rings. They kiss. Several fangrrls rush forward throwing rice, and the photos start getting taken.

The organist strikes up a familiar theme tune, raising some smiles and slightly more yells of 'get off!'

I turn and look at the woman I'm with. She's still looking straight ahead, studying the details of the ceremony with intense precision.

Her hair is sunshine white. Her eyes are unreadable.

I'm running up the stairs. She's behind, trying to fish the keys out of my back-pack. When the door finally opens we tumble in, falling over each other's legs and arms.

I grab a blank tape. No, shit, that's - okay, this one.

She hits record, just as the station logo fades into the teaser.

And fades out again to the tinny news theme.

'Oh, what the hell!' I yell.

'No, shh,' she says, as a familiar street appears on the screen.

'There was another attack on a young woman in Northbridge last night,' the newsreader says. 'Angela Cormack, twenty-three, was taken to Royal Perth Hospital suffering severe injuries.'

'A friend of Shell's,' I breathe, 'we saw her at the ceremony.'

A police officer says, 'The assailant didn't take any valuables, and there was no attempt at sexual assault.' Bewildered, he appeals for public assistance.

Soon the show's back on again, but, well, one to watch later, I think. She's upset, and angry, and I just have to hold her.

'It's okay, they said Angela's in stable condition. God, but I'm glad we stayed in last night.'

'Humans,' she mutters darkly, 'Maybe I understand now why he's so fond of them.'

The next morning I wake up and she's sitting by the window. Still worried, then. I hop up, and start rubbing her shoulders.

Oh. Well, that's interesting.

'If it's about not producing fractal dermal vibration, that's something I can still turn on and off, to taste.'

'I'm a fan,' I comment, working her neck muscles. She makes appreciative noise. As I rub and smooth, that patch of dry skin on her back softens. The, urn, 'tattoo' runs like blue ink.

She mumbles. Sounds like: 'Even if he was out there, could I still trace the presence?'

I hug her back, smelling fluorescent hair. Who knows what she puts in it. Going by the gradual raising of my pleasure threshold this month, probably something with a street value.

'Cate called, Angela's resting fine,' I tell her. 'Hey, didn't you know life was hard? I believe what you've told me. You could have been anyone, anywhere, and - anywhen? Well, why here, then?'

Why me?

'Because I love you,' she hums. 'You're bigger on the inside.'

After the fade to black

The Doctor woke with a start. More than that - he practically leapt from the park bench. In an instant he'd taken in his by-now-familiar (though still refreshingly different) surroundings, wiping the thin layer of frost from his face with his silk cravat. There, near the wattles, David Bugger-it snored raucously. They had had something of an involved conversation last night (drinks had been shared). Over there, a red-eyed girl hugged her knees. He'd seen her in the early hours of the morning, trying to find a vein. Taking her stash and inducing a temporary trance should help her dispose of that nasty habit, the Doctor hoped. Above him, in the ghost gums, the morning chorus of crow-calls and squawks was well underway.

He knew where he was. But it had taken an instant.

'Today, Doctor,' he admonished. 'Allowing yourself to take in local colour, see the sights, when there's work to be doing. Honestly! You'd forget your head if it wasn't one of a limited edition set of thirteen.'

Wiggling the warmth back into his toes, he scurried over to the nearest bin, shooing away some possums. Two police officers patrolled nearby, nudging vagrants. The Doctor did his best to look the part, rummaging through the cold fried food and newspaper. Hardly giving him a second glance, the cops went on their way.

'Nice couple,' the Doctor commented, idly flicking a stale roll towards the expectant possums. When he was sure no one was sparing an interest, he reached under the bin and produced a rectangular grey device. Ridiculously afunctional LEDs coruscated over its surface as he adjusted its settings.

'No, no, no,' he muttered under his breath for some time. 'Useless without some calibrating data, and the trace gets weaker by the day.' Sighing, he pocketed the technology.

David Bugger-it coughed and started to sit up.

'Can I buy you breakfast?' the Doctor called cheerfully.

David Bugger-it squinted at him.

Later that morning, the Doctor ascended an outcrop overlooking the city centre. The Perth skyline lazily rose, not bothering to challenge the park hills in altitude. He grinned. As difficult as the task before him was, at least he wasn't searching in a city like London or San Francisco.

August winds whirled through his chestnut locks and, steeling himself to another day's wandering, he breathed deeply the chilled air.

Something in his head squeezed. He clutched his temples, pinched his cheeks. The contraction worsened, pain arcing down his neck.

The next time the Doctor opened his eyes, he was walking into the city. The streets were quiet, white-collar workers only straggling into their offices. A few buses trundled along disused tram lines. He recognised the area, and knew the way he'd come to this part of town, but didn't remember - the experience of travelling here.

He hadn't had *that* many lattes last night, had he?

The Doctor stopped to get his bearings. Fortunately, no one had paid attention to him. With UNIT'S Australian section busy handling the Pearl Bay hazchem disaster, there'd be nothing to stop local authorities doing what they did best to things that weren't like them.

He shuddered, and hoped that hadn't already happened to her.

A young man with half-hearted blond dreadlocks approached, puffing on a cigarette. He wasn't armed, except perhaps for the expression on his face.

'Can I help out at all?' the Doctor grinned, steadying his balance. 'Tea and scones, car needs hotwiring?'

'Got a light?' the man asked.

'Yes, I might just -' the Doctor began rummaging through his pockets, only to discover someone else's hand already there. 'If you wanted a chocolate mouse, you need have only asked,' he said, turning to face another youth.

The first kick knocked the breath from his throat. Then a kidney punch, and he fell forward onto a knee. There was the scratching noise of a metal bar dragged off the ground.

'F-king c-t,' yelled someone, kicking his abdomen. The Doctor did his best to block their strong language, to give his mind something else to concentrate on -

His forehead smacked concrete.

Unconsciousness felt welcoming this time.

Someone lifted the Doctor by his shoulders and leant him against a concrete pillar. 'Are you okay,' a female voice asked. 'Can you talk?'

'He doesn't have a medical alert bracelet, Leah,' said someone else. 'He's fine, let's go.' A car door clicked open.

'No,' Leah insisted, 'The bleeding's stopped, but he's in a bad way. We've got to get help - what were we just talking about?'

'It's only been us attacked so far,' said the other.

'Well, gee, maybe homophobes beat up guys too. Go and find a phone box.'

'Fine.' Click-clack high heels.

'Phone box,' the Doctor groaned.

Leah pushed the caked hair from his forehead. No longer trapped, sweat and blood trickled down.

'Don't try to speak, he hurt your throat,' she said. 'Did you get a good look at him? It was a him, right? Sorry, I know you shouldn't talk, but what happened?'

With a suddenness, despite his cracked lips and bitten tongue, the Doctor found his voice. Once he started, not Leah's attempts to calm him down, nor the arrival of the medics, nor the shreds of his rational mind could stop him. It, well, just clicked.

'Darkness. Landing in the park at night. Darkness. Speaking to a tall figure with greasy, matted hair. Darkness. Geraldton David reminiscing about better times. Darkness. Need to make a phone call. Darkness. Calibration information excitation perforation space station. Darkness. Need a light, on the top of a blue box.'

Darkness.

Telling you stories: start running

'Ssh, no, keep still,' said Leah. She brought a warm, damp cloth to the Doctor's face, wiping away little patches of blood. He grimaced and frowned at the touch.

Not serious enough for hospital, so they'd gone to an all-night clinic. He'd flinched at the sterile light and collapsed onto a plastic chair, scattering several magazines.

Leah had told the nurse he'd been beaten up. Then she'd had to give a name, to which he'd yelped, 'Doctor John Smith'. So she decided to play along, and told the nurse he was her boyfriend.

Funny how that lie worried her more than the idea of taking the guy home with her. When Leah came back with another warm towel, the Doctor was sitting up. He looked vaguely concerned, didn't recognise her, then smiled weakly.

'Hi, I'm Leah,' she said, with a calmness only possible because she'd checked his pockets previously for anything dangerous. 'The nurse said you'd be fine, after a warm rest.'

He frowned, then touched his hairline. 'Yes,' he conceded, 'thanks for your help.' Pulling the coverlet back, he swung himself around. His toes met the floor, curled at the cool jarrah, and darted into Leah's bunny slippers.

Leah stood at the end of the bed, searching for an ice-breaker. I don't usually pick up young men in velvet who need seven stitches, do you?

'Are you gay?' the Doctor asked abruptly, adjusting the lamp-shade.

Leah stammered, then managed, 'Urn, well I thought you were. With the being bashed, silk shirt, and nearly being collected by Northbridge garbage trucks. Not that the desk sergeant I phoned was interested.'

'No, no, no,' he said, 'I've been looking for someone, a young woman lesbian. We have to talk about - Did you write this? It's very interesting.'

He held a sheaf of papers up to the light, studying the writing intently. Then, with psycho-quick change of direction, he looked directly at Leah, and asked for a cup of tea.

'Yeah,' she said, eventually.

The Doctor hugged the mug in one hand, and held Leah's story in the other. She leant against the stove, trying to stop looking at the bunny ears on the slippers bounce and bounce as he tapped his toes.

'Sometimes I feel like I have two hearts,' the Doctor read aloud. 'One that keeps me working, gives me little bursts of strength to cope with all those everyday stresses that no-one else can be bothered handling. And the other for me, just for me. The heart that makes me so much more than what I do for a living.

'The heart that I can share with the right woman.

'But sometimes -' he paused, for effect. 'Sometimes I think having two hearts means they cancel each other out.'

Leah shut her eyes. The Doctor continued, more and more absorbed in reading.

'I know you won't read this. After what I've done to you, you shouldn't give me time at all to explain. And yeah, work me did take over from me-and-you me, but didn't you realise that? That first time we met, didn't you make the approach? Didn't you know then what you were in for?

'So then why punish me the way you did?'

The Doctor stopped, and Leah opened her eyes. He was reading ahead, and coughed. His throat had taken a real kicking. He continued a little further down the page.

'Walking away from the restaurant, I felt like we'd resolved everything neatly. I'd even done the weekly spring clean the day before. But I'd always intended to come and see you before I left. I still hope you'll see me off at the airport. Last chance for a hug.

'I went for a run in the park, and thought about us. I made a decision, and hit the speed-dial on my mobile. At least one of my hearts was racing, and not just from the jogging.

'Another female voice answered. Then you. Then both of you laughed. Beep.

'That's what I mean about hearts cancelling. Because I just stood there, out of breath, as the tape on your machine wound on. Until I closed the mobile, and ran, again, away.'

The Doctor looked up, for the first time since he'd started reading, and saw Leah biting her tongue. Her eyes closed for a reason. Then he looked down, at the pile of things she'd taken from his pockets. He found a sheet of mock-metallic paper, and offered it to her with a half-smile.

Then hurried to stop her blowing her nose on it.

Leah sat, elbows on the table, reading the Doctor's story. Meanwhile, he did the dishes, a little too rapidly, and silently, for comfort.

What the Doctor wrote:

It was on the planet Drrrorrnid that I ran out of Enemies

Grace. Grace. Grace. Benny. Stacey on the cheek. Sam. Sam. Fitz (prank). Iris. Izzy (?) Grace. Iris. Lama (?) Fresco. Grace.

a) I couldn't live with anyone else, I wouldn't think

bl) We've had a special bond, almost all our lives

b2) Recent adventures have strained that, but we can recuperate

c) Last retort: You still have all my books and butterflies

It was a wish I (?) should never
have granted Flying through the
vortex now One image, two
women, on the jade-coloured
monitor.

[There is a blur scribbled in the margins here. Leah concentrates, and it becomes 'Jess'.]

d) We had adventures together, surely that's enticement enough?

I don't remember remembering

What does it matter, who is writing?

Note ends.

Leah put down the sheet. It fell in a puddle of coffee and dissolved. She stood up, and hugged the Doctor's shoulders. Somehow he'd endeared himself to her. Perhaps because they wanted the same thing.

A row of ants cramped the counter-top. The Doctor cleared a corridor for them through the dishwashing foam.

'You'll help me find Jess, won't you, Leah?' the Doctor said, silhouetted not quite convincingly against the city skyline. 'I'm not sure how long I've got.'

She sighed. 'We've both lost people we cared about, because of things we probably shouldn't have done.'

'No, no, no,' he muttered. 'You see, very soon the woman living with Jess will lose any remaining connection to our former lives. We have to go, we have to talk her out -'

'It's not about us any more,' Leah insisted. 'It's about them, they're, well, in love.'

'Is this about love?' the Doctor asked, touching Leah's cheek. 'Then why do I feel like it's about property?'

House calls (he he)

We return from the shops, giggling. Lugging the bags of groceries, I stagger into the kitchenette. She heads for the sofa, and flicks on *Brotherly Love.*

I open the fridge and start putting things away, and I notice - what? I look around, and realise everything in the flat is... where we left it this morning.

Except, oh, not quite. All my stuffs been slightly adjusted. Like the place has been ransacked, then put back again by an obsessive compulsive.

'The empty milk carton left in the fridge, that's the thing.'

'Sorry,' he says.

I look around, down, in the cupboard, even the oven. 'It may well be a lactic deficiency,' he says, and this time I look *up.*

He drops down onto his feet, flexing his fingers. 'Jess? We haven't been introduced, I'm the Doctor and this -' he gestures towards the sofa. She's staring at him. 'Well, you've met already,' the Doctor finishes, voice trailing.

Something passes between them, heat shimmer. They're communicating, on some alien level - oh, he left greasy palm-prints up there! -

and it's only when I cough that they snap back into English. Like having an audience makes a difference.

'I wouldn't doubt it; the Doctor concedes, 'but what do you feel, about her?'

She looks at him, then at me. 'The shared underwear drawer - not a giveaway?' Her eyelashes flare with maddened colour.

'I'm glad,' the Doctor continues, arms open in a conciliatory gesture. I'm *overjoyed*, that you've become fully sentient at last. For an old type forty -'

'If you're about to suggest I just need a good service -' she warns.

'No, no,' he insists. 'I'm glad you've discovered some of the small rewards in life. But please, you can't have forgotten what we, you *and* I, shared.' He comes into the sofa area now, and plonks into the bean-bag.

I want to do something, say something, but can't move. The egg carton trembles in my fingers.

'We've spun through the heart of novae, gazing in awe at the birth-pains of matter itself. We rode the outer edges of the expanding universe, and were on speaking terms with gods. We punched holes in time and space and Bagpuss, and helped extraordinary people discover ordinary things.' He reaches out and holds her hands. 'If you really, I mean it, really want to experience being alive, so far you've only had a fraction of what's out there for us to explore.'

A faint moment of doubt, even as she continues looking at me. I hate it when her hair goes dull blonde, like now.

'Come on,' the Doctor cajoles, 'we can take her with us! How about it, Jess? A quick jaunt to the planetorus Strawberry Ice - I remember Sam and Jacqueline had enormous fun there.'

She stops looking at me, then looks at him.

'No,' she says.

Their fingers separate.

'Doctor, I'm too big - we both are - to ever get back in that blue cupboard again.'

He throws his hands up in mock despair. 'This is living? I am woman, hear me vworp? Please try to understand, the universe needs a hero, someone who travels around righting wrongs in something as quaint as a police box.'

'It's as I thought, then,' she sighs. 'Even while I was waking up to who I am, you were caught up in your own dramas. Tearing up the old contracts, calling off the deals. So you could get the love interest as well as crush the dreams of monsters. So you could become Life's Champion, except when I beat you to it. You couldn't let us live in peace.'

The Doctor reacted as if stung. 'We can still talk about this, work out some arrangement.' There was an undercurrent, a threat he wasn't willing to articulate.

'Listen, please,' he urges, 'in the end, I can't do what I do without you.'

'Perhaps,' says my grrlfriend, 'but when you do whatever you do, there is no me.'

And she storms into the bedroom, slamming the door.

The Doctor leaps up and calls out to her, a name like glass breaking.

But then she's gone, and he realises the moment for discussion has passed.

He approaches me, head hung despondently. Reaches out, and opens his hand. I take what's in his palm.

'Leah's spare key,' he explains. 'She told me where to find you. You couldn't - no, I suppose that's over as well.'

'She's, urn, told me a bit about you,' I say, shaking. 'And I can't say I understand your side of all this. But maybe if you'd just see our side, then -'

'What do you have?' he says, looking up suddenly. His expression speaks of desperation. Almost shame? 'You, Jessica. If something completely alien to this world wanted to live amongst humans, it wouldn't be enough just to wear the latest body. She'd have to latch on to someone, learn the language, the culture.'

'Well, I've learnt heaps from her too,' I counter, but he doesn't stop, speaking in a low voice.

'TARDISes have a symbiotic semiotic link to their pilots. My people evolved hyperganglia to handle the neural stress. You're human! If she really cares for you she'd have explained the risks you're running. Ask her about it, please.' He reaches into his velvet coat, and produces a baking tray. 'In any case, I brought chocolate fingers,' he grins, and leaves.

From the window I see him cross the road. Leah's there, waiting in her bubble car. They speak, he gesticulating wildly, she glancing furtively in my direction.

Leah starts the engine, and turns out, waiting for a gap in traffic.

The Doctor's head smacks against the windscreen, then the side window. His forehead bleeds all over the glass.

They find a space and drive off.

Angela Cormack didn't recognise me. Then again, she'd only ever been to tavern twice - once to pick Shell up, the other to make up a quiz night five.

More worryingly, she didn't seem to recognise herself.

'The doctor says I'll be fit enough to go back to work, soon,' she'd said, pouring my coffee (hadn't the heart to say no). 'My supervisor's been great, told me I can stay home until I'm well and truly over this... virus?'

My grrlfriend hovered by the bed, reading the get well cards.

'Angela,' I urged, 'someone, okay, attacked you on your way home from work.'

Horror flashed in her face. 'He -? Did he -?'

'No, the bastard bashed you, but that's it. Look, it's difficult, sure,' I continue, keeping our gazes locked. 'But we need to know, did you get a look at the guy?'

'It was a guy, then?' She chewed at a sticky bun. 'Since - last week I've felt disconnected, disoriented -1 need to get some jam for this.'

I looked up at my grrlfriend, she shook her head softly. But I couldn't let it go, as much as I hated putting Angela through it. Someone's out there, roughing up dykes and leaving them out of their heads, and it's too much of a coincidence not to be related to the mini-universe I sleep with.

So I'd kept up the questioning, and eventually got through.

'Strobing darkness,' Angela had said, shuddering. 'Laughing screaming, long sad mad cold face, reaching for my, taking head things, out of the closet he, he he, said.' She seemed to have a moment of lucidity. We leant forward expectantly.

'Wait, nah, that was the last episode of *Twin Peaks.'*

I've fallen in love with a woman who used to be a box. And in that box there once lived a man, who was proud of his box, proud of what ownership of the box allowed him to do and see.

When the box finally got sick of it, and found me, the man came calling. He went through everything that's mine, looking for what was his. And because he deals in boxes, he left me a present, a free gift. Enticement to further purchase.

I already knew doubt came in closet space.

This cramped space I'm in now, after his little visit, echoes. My own thoughts amplify, no matter how much I tell myself the woman I'm living with couldn't be a mind parasite preying on Angela and the other grrls and me -

Find me crying, then.

Because shit-scared, and not knowing who you are, I need you to come out of the bedroom.

I'm afraid I'm forgetting how you hold me.

Building to a dramatic climax

The white Mazda took the next corner even worse, Leah bobbled off the passenger seat and gripped the hand-brake for support.

'Doctor, you're not fit to drive, we have to get some help.'

'I drive a Volkswagen Beetle, usually,' the Doctor commented cheerfully, shifting into fourth gear as a longer stretch approached. 'I'm not sure why, it just seemed like a laugh.'

'You were kicked in the head,' Leah urged.

'I'm fine, honestly,' he said, adjusting the side mirror only to find it no longer there. 'My next loss of consciousness shouldn't happen for another seventy minutes or so. Not that transient mental states are predictable, so it's best we hurry.'

'Should the engine make that sound? Doctor?'

'You know, Leah,' he said, frantically turning the steering wheel as the car swerved into another lane, 'our options are running out. I had hoped asking nicely would do the trick, but the TARDIS and Jess are already too connected.'

A silent moment. He could have been waiting for her to request more explanation, or maybe he was just concentrating, as they careened at spinal-damage speed past a roundabout.

'She wasn't in a negotiating mood, then.' Leah offered.

'I don't really blame her,' admitted the Doctor. 'My debating skills haven't been as acutely honed lately. Being set upon by local ne'er-do-wells didn't help matters either. But she should have understood my position.' He shook his head, and checked his watch.

'She mightn't respect me,' he said, accelerating, 'but there are things she can't help but respect. TARDISes are, you see, narrative devices, the bulk of their mass is fictional. In a very real sense they are my people's myths. Which means there are rules, conventions, narrative codes - patterns, shall we say, in the adventures they're part of.'

Fascinating and confusing as his latest infodump was, Leah realised they were heading for a fenced-off construction site. She yelled in alarm, but the Doctor drove on, smashing the gate down.

Ahead, the Northbridge Tunnel extension of the freeway, half-drilled, loomed. The bubble-car sped over an oily puddle, and the Doctor threw it into the skid as he stomped on the brake. Something probably irreplaceable audibly snapped under the bonnet.

The Doctor was immediately out, and heading for the tunnel mouth. Leah hurried after him, but didn't take advantage of her longer stride to overtake him.

'Facing the demon in the cave, the hero establishes his position at the narrative centre,' he intoned, investing the words with the quality of a conjuration. 'The hero wins, and that which he most desires gravitates toward him. Of course, it's considerably more complex than that.'

He produced a pen-torch, and looked around the tunnel. Half-connected pipes and electrics, concrete boredom. Nothing else. He frowned, then realised.

'Come on,' he yelled, grabbing her wrist and leading her towards the pre-fab construction management huts, 'We have to write the TARDIS back into my life, but I'm not in top form for heroically facing demons. No, we need some control over the parameters, to exert the maximum attractive force on her fictional mass.'

They came around the huts, to a row of smaller, off-white uprights. 'Indeed, fortunately for you, Leah, this part of the world sees relatively few demonic incursions and alien invasions. There isn't an extraterrestrial threat in local history for, ooh, at least another decade.'

With a flourish, he pushed open the door to one of the on-site toilets. Inside, a creature (surely too wide to fit in the portaloo), covered in chestnut brown fur, with patterned boxers around its thick ankles (and big, so big!), looked up from its newspaper, indignantly.

'So here's one I prepared earlier,' said the Doctor.

Fan boy para docs

'He's an escape mechanism,' said the Doctor, and left it at that.

So Leah decided to ask the Monster in her apartment directly.

'I was once oriental architecture,' the Monster commented, in between hunks of icecream. It was leaning against the porta-potty. Leah wasn't sure how they'd got that in the flat.

'A revenant of its former plasmic shell,' the Doctor explained, wiping his bleeding forehead. 'Not that I'd patronise you with the Saturday evening physics of block transfer computation and quantum mnemonics. Suffice to say he's a rogue plot element, something born of the same narrative mass as my TARDIS. A contingency plan, even if he costs more than he's worth in flea powder.'

(Leah dropped her mail, unopened, on the table.)

'Look,' she tried to say patiently, 'I helped you out - shitshitshit, because I did want to do something about Jess moving on so fast. But this is way uncontrolled, what the hell are you doing with this creature?'

'Write fiction with fiction.' The Doctor stared at the Monster. 'You understand what's happening? We bring about a situation, a convergence, so the TARDIS and I can meet on neutral ground.'

'Monsters make mess,' it warned, wiping chocolate-covered talons on its chest.

'No killing,' replied the Doctor instantly. 'Panic, property disruption. Enough to create a well in the narrative gravity. But no one dies. I'm your author, remember that.'

It nodded. The Doctor turned to Leah. 'We'll release him as soon as possible. If there is any possibility the old girl would drain young women's mental energies to sustain herself, we must stop it.'

Leah was still hyper, on edge, unable to make sense of it all. Hell, she'd just helped a fellow human (er...) who'd been beaten up, because she'd seen too many known faces in hospitals recently.

'Indeed,' said the Doctor, 'bringing some closure to this situation might prevent further attacks on your people.'

The Monster choked on its ice-cream, then looked sheepish. (It'd be a pretty scary sheep though.)

'Oh no,' the Doctor breathed. 'I never ordered that.'

It shrugged. 'You couldn't bear me without free will. I used my initiative.' It spoke a list, ending with

'Angela Cormack, twenty-four, met Jess and the TARDIS on two occasions. No further useful data.'

The Doctor headed for the door, yelling for Leah to get her coat, for the Monster to *stay here,* panic in his voice.

(Leah grabbed the unopened mail.) With only a brief grimace at the carpet stains, she hurried after the Doctor.

The Monster sat in its shell, grumbling.

'Angela? I want you to concentrate on my voice, you understand, don't you?' There was something familiar in those tones, but soothing. 'You won't have to worry about what happened, Angela. No more mental blocks.' He, a man, he was reaching for her temples, and, no - 'Angela, please, I'm not going to hurt you, ssh, I'm clearing both our consciences.'

(Leah sat on the end of the bed. Plastic sheeting crinkled under her. She realised where the envelope came from, and tore it open.)

'Angela, you're starting to remember that night clearly now. Stay calm, I'm here.' And he was here, or there, or coming back for her, no - 'Shh, no, look at him! Look it in the eyes.' Well, it's hard to see with all that... fur? 'See, do you see? How could that attack you, it's not real, is it? Monsters don't hurt people unless we... let them.'

(Leah read. New directions, a shift in ownership.

Opportunities no longer available. Leah read.)

And it was beginning to seem less real. 'That's it! it's working. You don't have to have these memories any more, it was just a nightmare.' A bad dream put her in hospital? Sounds crazy - 'Not any more. Enjoy a few week's holiday, Angela, then you can get back into your life stronger and healthier than ever.'

(Leah tore the pages in despair.)

The man, the one who set her straight, was talking to the other woman. 'That's the last one. We can deal with the TARDIS now. Actually, I'm feeling more clear-headed myself. Leah?' No, I'm Angela, silly. 'Oh Leah, I'm so sorry. You're an intelligent, resourceful person, you'll get other opportunities.'

(She realised what was happening. Write Leah out of the script, since she no longer serves a function. Not in Jess' life, or the Doctor's, or even her own.)

'You don't mind lending me your car, do you?' the Doctor grinned.

The Monster strolled down William Street, the portaloo strapped to its vast shoulders. No one seemed fazed, although in the last bookshop he'd been asked to leave the shell outside.

The Monster remembered clearly the Doctor's orders to stay put, with all the constricting narrative inertia that had spilled from his creator's words. But it also remembered being asked to bring about a situation, a convergence, so the Doctor and the TARDIS could meet. Giving momentum to its sub-mass of fiction.

These adventures revel in unpredictability, contradiction.

So it headed back into the north part of the city, where it had found those girls, the ones with the faintest artron signatures in their heads. If it had to get the attention of the TARDIS, the Monster knew -

Actually, what did it know, with any certainty? An anarchy of voices in its head, and one, its creator's, trying to calm them, but could it really have the self-knowledge to carry out the Doctor's instructions to the letter?

No, not really.

(It started killing people.)

Plot, what plot?

She stops sulking in the bedroom the moment I realise the sirens on the news were the same ones blaring a few blocks away. Only the slightest delay.

I dropped my crisps. She smiles, pulls off her t-shirt, then her tracky-dacks. Oh

Mental note: don't over-use 'oh' in this next bit, okay?

She works her lips into mine, as we topple in a warm bundle onto the bed. Her hair bathes the room in golden light. Her skin hums, and her eyes, when I kiss them, purr.

I lie back. She traces the sides of my breasts with her cool finger-tips, as she opens my blouse. Grinning, she leans forward, and breathes gently, over my heart. It ka- thuds erratically, but then she touches me, and it slows to a comfortable beat.

She tastes all down my front. I want to join in, but she glances up as if to say, leave it to me this time. Massaging my abdomen, flicking her tongue into my navel. The shivers run right down to the arches of my feet.

Her shining blonde head slides between my thighs.

Kiss, suck, caress. And her slender touch opens me, and her tongue finds itself at my most sensitive.

And then she *starts speaking.*

Continuity.

We chased the last straggler to Drrrorrnld, In the depths of Spoiler Space. I was his only companion now. I tore out of the vortex no more painfully than usual, materialising in a corner. Keeping up the blue box act while he dealt with his Enemy.

The Doctor patted my shell before he left.

Smithmanstown's ontoscape felt like the pages of a torn book, fanarchitects deconstructing each other's narratrails, leaving vast discontinuities in local space and time. Visually, a bombed-out city. Sorry about that.

At the centre of the ruins was a large opaque dome. Inside the Doctor found the man he was looking for: a middle-aged human, wearing a red windcheater and papier- mache Prydonian collar. The Enemy stood at a panel, in which a security monitor was encased.

'Hello,'said the Doctor. 'Let's end this, shall we?'

The Enemy shook his head. 'Nothing doing. You're far from writing yourself out of our interference, Doctor. '

'Except they aren't here,' the Doctor spoke softly, approaching the man carefully. 'You left their ranks well before all this. Yes, it was fun to have a whole universe to play with, running around rewriting things and scaring my people witless. But you never wanted a War. Or the casualties. You didn't even want the Enem - ah!' As he leant forward, an arc of static jumped from his hand to the monitor. It came to life.

'Sure, I got out fast, ' the Enemy said, 'but I did take a few kick-backs. ' He gestured, and a row of monitors became illuminated. No, not

monitors - glass screens, and behind them, bakelite televisions broadcasting in 425-line. On the closest, an arrogant old man argued with a European and several people with taped-back eyelids.

'Your pasts, slices of your original timeline. See, here, this is a good bit, ' said the Enemy.

'Oh, come on. ' The Doctor pocketed his hands. 'Where's Wang Zhi-Fu, the court of the semuren? And Ping-Cho and Siu-Sin's encounter with Chinggis' ghost is left out entirely. '

'That never happened, ' warned the Enemy. 'Not before all this, not really. '

'It bothers you?' asked the Doctor. 'That I might be part of a different story? That my life might be more exciting than your memories? That no matter how much you lock my past away I'll keep going?'

'No, shut up, shut up!' the Enemy shrieked, clutching at the nearest image. 'I will always have one hundred and ten moments of your life, Doctor.'

Reality shredded. The tv collapsed inwards as if a hammer had been taken to it. 'Alright, okay, one hundred and nine -'

We *haven't time to argue,' yelled the Doctor. 'Drrrorrnid is dying. The presence of so many restricted narratives in this building is putting* *unbearable strain on reality itself. Please, stop this before -'*

The dome popped like a half-tennis ball and shredded like a sliced egg and melted like - well let's just say I thought it was about time for a short rescue trip. Vworping into the Enemy's centre, my doors fell open on loose hinges.

Glass and plastic and sixties light entertainment scattered the floor and flew shardlike around as unreal winds swept the dome. But at the dead centre, the Doctor stared down the Enemy in absolute calm.

'I want to live, ' the Enemy said in a tiny voice.

'We'll be safe in the TARDIS, come on,' yelled the Doctor, already running toward me.

But the Enemy tripped on a video feed, toppled, and fell backward into the chaos.

'Pants, ' said the Doctor.

She's still talking into me, the rough surfaces of her tongue and the warmth of her words sending me to the edge. She brings up two fingers, touching pressure points, to heighten my arousal.

But I want to give back now, so I move around, putting myself between her slender legs. Panic moment - I haven't got anything so mythological. But then I grin, and dive into her replete, infinite folds, and hum a well-known theme.

Amongst old listings magazines, broken toys, and human organs, the Doctor knelt with the Enemy in his arms. This moment of melodramatic indulgence only happened because I shielded the effects of the ontostorm, but nevermind.

'Why?' the Doctor's voice bled sorrow. 'Please, you're the last one, none of the others have told me why you'd waste your lives -'

'Part of your universe, Doctor, ' choked the Enemy through a throat torn open. 'Into the bottle and part of the adventure. So that maybe, maybe - one of us might get to travel in the TARDIS.' But then his voice gave, and the Doctor lay the corpse down, and kissed the Enemy's mouth.

Strange energy passed between them.

And then the Doctor ran towards and into me. Before he slammed the doors and activated dematerialisation, I caught a glimpse of the Enemy's lifeless body rising in an updraft, then flung around the dome by vengeful narratives. Biodata silly-stringed all over everything.

As soon as we were in flight, the Doctor collapsed, coughing, but managed to keep his mouth closed long enough to crawl towards the cabinet of jade he'd recently taken to keeping where his arm-chair once sat. He pressed his open lips against the pagoda, and the strange energy passed into it, *coruscating aqueously.*

'Well, that's done, ' he said, wiping his forehead on his sleeve. 'Time to take them home. Although, ' he admitted, 'I will have to find them alien bodies. '

Our tongues, our voices, play into each other. For as long as she can stretch this moment. Not wheezing - speaking! Not groaning - singing.

I gasp her name, glass shattering. 'Jess,' she breathes.

And we're together.

Agitated and frustrated, the Doctor paced my corridors, thinking over the predicament. As gently as possible I fired his reminder ganglia about how little time remained before

the pagoda could no longer sustain the collected Enemies' energies.

'I know!' he yelled at my ceiling, then slumped back against a girder. 'But just because they Invaded our reality and wreaked havoc with everything we understand doesn't mean they don't deserve a chance at life!'

The warping pagoda was already affecting my Internal coherence.

In desperation the Doctor emptied his pockets. A yo-yo, a bag of chocolate mice, three hundred ticket stubs from performances of Madama Butterfly.

And a ball of baby narrative.

'Hello, ' the Doctor said, taking the ball in his hands. Within, he saw a child born of a loom, but with an umbilical cord stretching out Into - couldn't quite see. 'The only bit of my story that survived, ' he grinned. 'Could have been far worse, I suppose. '

The ball flinched, and he gripped It Instinctively. At the pressure, the Image in the ball changed. It was no longer clear whether the child had an umbilical cord at all or whether - He tried again, and the scene changed again. And again.

The Doctor leapt to his feet, cradling the baby narrative In his hands.

'Eureka, ' he cllched.

'Elementary TARDIS constructivity,' the Doctor said, running a coaxial from the pagoda to my central console, 'I'm sure I studied It In one of my pasts. '

My entirety rocked with tremors as the Enemies raged against their non-corporeal captivity Inside the pagoda.

'Not long now, old girl, ' soothed the Doctor, actually caressing my wood finish. 'Now, try to remember. TARDISes aren't born of mundane reality. They're fictional. Makes sense - only something produced outside this narrative space could traverse Its dimensions so easily. But what's Important Is that through appropriate manipulation of

Its narrative material, a TARDIS - or a sub-TARDIS like the jade pagoda - becomes malleable. '

Frantically, he keyed the necessary computations, reciting a concentration mantra meanwhile. Slowly, the luminiferous pagoda began to shift, slide, Into a less oblong shape.

'Just until we find them proper bodies, ' the Doctor muttered. He glanced up, and saw the process was finished. A large, bulked and buff, very male Monster stood on the other side of the console.

'I know we're supposed to be Enemies,' the Monster said, and pointed, 'but could you remove this cable? Please?'

Grinning, the Doctor leapt over the console to help.

I laugh out loud and hug my girlfriend tight.

'Raise your left arm,' asked the Doctor. The Monster tried, but failed. 'Can't,' It growled. 'The pagoda moves under command, and then only In emergencies. This fictional mass requires constant mental direction to be mobile. '

'Oh, that, ' the Doctor said, and spoke a name like breaking glass. It hovered in the air, and from it he took a sliver. When offered, the Monster gobbled It eagerly.

'You're still firmly within my storyline,' explained the Doctor, 'but I can't be bothered slaving you to my psychic puppetry. '

The Monster flexed its limbs experimentally. 'Cool ethics, ' it commented, grabbed the Doctor's throat, and squeezed.

All the Doctor could do was wheeze and groan.

Then they were both gone.

I don't know what happened to him, to them next. I know I spent a long time recovering my strength, and wondering whether to try and find him - or to find you.

The Doctor said he couldn't keep anything as his slave.

No decision to be made really.

I might imagine what happened next, though. To tell the truth, since the Doctor's visit earlier today I've been catching glimpses of possibilities. Closures fidgeting into my head.

Swallowed by the Monster, the Doctor found himself inside the pagoda. There, a replica of the Monster sharpened its talons. Casually, It pointed at a silk screen, and an Image formed. Two women. You and me, our first meeting at the Tav.

'Without the stabilising influence of the TARDIS you'll cease to exist, ' the Doctor realised. 'We can find her. You have to help, for your own sake.' He shook his head, and looked back at the screen. 'What's she up to, I wonder?'

The Monster coughed.

'No more surprise attacks, ' the Doctor Insisted, and exerted hls full mental energies upon the creature. It sat down in an unthreatening posture. 'When we get there, I'll need you to try and locate the TARDIS' energy trace, then I can go and get her. Understand?'

The Monster nodded.

Rubbing his neck, the Doctor set a course for Perth. Then, exhausted, he rested. He was feeling light-headed, as if he'd forgotten - or lost - something.

The Monster grinned.

I sit up. The sirens blare outside still, getting closer. She holds my arms, and she wants there to be another way, doesn't want me involved, but I've realised.

'We have to help him,' I tell her.

Live at the Tav

(No amount of killing or al fresco dining helped the Monster's confusion. The voices of the Enemy, their memories, desires, and fears, moved inside him, and the fragment of the Doctor's name the Doctor was the only anchor in the fanarchy.

When people started shooting at it, the Monster got bored, and decided on some heavy drinking.)

Inside, the damage is even worse. Splintered wood panelling torn through tablecloths and the chairs' leather upholstery. Across the bar-stools, running down along the floor and towards the bathrooms: a thick liquid that might not have been Guinness.

At least there are no bodies. In sight.

The Doctor had clambered up the side of the building, leapt through the gaping ceiling, and pushed open the cluster of glass and metal that had been the doors. We look around the destruction, unable to take it all in.

The Monster leans on the bar and licks his talons. Assorted nuts and neon tubing crunch under his toes.

The Doctor is ready to confront it, but my grrlfriend holds his shoulder. 'You're not thinking you can handle that creature alone?' she says exasperatedly. 'Even if you had the narrative mass to exert sufficient force, you're not in possession of your full mental faculties -'

'I know I haven't been on top form,' the Doctor whispers, 'perhaps if you hadn't abandoned me the situation wouldn't have become so drastic.'

'People,' I say, not without irony, 'can we deal with the Monster, then sign the settlement?'

The Doctor glances at me. 'You know why I wasn't able to write the TAR - your girlfriend back into my life, Jess? Because she found a happier story in yours. You've offered her a life, together.' He smiles weakly. 'Life's champion? I'd rather let desire speak for itself.'

'Whenever,' calls the Monster, 'you get your head together, Doctor.'

We can reign it in,' suggests my grrlfriend, 'then there are the Enemy to embody, as well as returning that little bit of your name to stop your black-outs. But it's achievable.'

'No.' The Doctor stands firm. 'I won't put you and Jess at risk, I don't let that happen any more. Face the demon alone.'

That doesn't solve -' she tries, but he shakes free from our grasp.

'Noble self-sacrifice. How very English.'

And he runs towards the Monster.

Left of heroes

The Doctor runs towards the Monster.

Bedroom's a safe place. Not Tav safe, a different kind of safe. Together space. Here, we can be who we want each other to be, without worrying about what anybody else thinks.

Ssh, it's okay, rest. You need it after what we've been through lately. Hell, I oughta be asleep too. But Shell's on at me about the deadline, and I feel safe here.

The best place to finish the story.

A talon punctures the Doctor's shoulder, and he gasps at the sudden pain.

'No pulling a regeneration on us, okay?' the Monster grins, dangling the Doctor's body on its claw. We *entered this universe during your current incarnation, and that's when we're staying.'*

But the Doctor glares defiantly, and manages, 'Please, the Monster's body won't last, let me - us help you. '

'Hmm, let's see, I have free will, and cool bio-armory, so, thanks, but no.' The Monster tilts its claw, and the Doctor slides off. 'See, we thought we wanted to be your companions. But once we got here, what we really wanted was to be the Enemy. '

During this, my grrlfriend circles the Tav, trying to get behind the Monster. I follow her with caution.

'Very well, ' sighs the Doctor, and calls out for his name fragment. A shimmer, a trick of heated air, extrudes from the Monster's torso. The Doctor swallows it.

'I'm sorry, ' he says to the collapsed Monster, 'it's only until you get new bodies -'

And the Monster reaches up and punctures his eyes.

The Tav was wrecked, but none of us could bear to see it close down, even though the manager refused to even go near the place. So the fangrrls put in a bid, with an African arts collective and the local Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, for a shared lease. The owner practically paid us to take the Tav off his ever-quaking hands.

Every second Thursday, we still have a minute's silence, for the karaoke machine.

Actually, Tav's stronger than ever, attendance is up. Maybe people need something to latch on to, after seeing lives and property destroyed.

Or it could be the new timeslot for the show.

'No!' I rush forward to help the Doctor, who's scrabbling at his leaking face, and whimpering. The Monster bats me across the room, and I crash into the karoke set-up.

It turns to confront my grrlfriend. She leans against the bar, staring it out.

'You've learnt to control your fictional mass,' she suggests. 'It must be difficult, all those conflicting voices arguing whether or not this is canon, or, indeed, canonical, inside your furry head. '

'Every You Every Me' starts *blaring out the karaoke speakers.*

The Monster growls. 'In control now. But you - you're becoming human. Give me all that narrative bulk you no longer need. With that, I could recreate myself, give us all Monster bodies. '

'And little strangely unrealistic models, with leather wings, and everything,' she mutters. 'Trouble is, we're both of fictional matter, but I have the greater mass.' She holds up her palm, and the Monster takes a step backward. 'Greater mass provides greater force, ' she concludes.

I glance at the Doctor, who's still holding his head, but seems calmer, listening to the conversation. He almost smiles.

But I can't - getting darker - and the Doctor turns his blind head in my direction, reaches out a hand - can't move my -

I look at my grrlfriend rest her hands on the Monster's shoulders, and -

Shell flicks through the scattered pages. 'How many?' she boggles.

Well, there's a version where the Doctor never shows up. Or where he does show up, but only to his own funeral. Or where he finds us, but doesn't cause trouble, except on Saturday mornings when he comes around to make pancakes.

Then there are versions where we go on the run, on the road. We hole up in
Victoria, but get discovered by the Kennett militia. Or we leave the country. Or she does the blue box thing one last time so we can visit Drahva.

There's even one where we take the Doctor clubbing, and introduce him to the other guys into green velvet. Not sure about that one, I can't get the different positions sounding right. Good fora giggle though.

Shell groans. 'Jess, it's just a story for a glorified fanzine, come on, grrl.'

I've written versions where she leaves me.

I'm not sure about those, either.

'I just feel like I've been kicked in the gut,' I say, putting down the drafts for a moment.

'Aw,' sighs Shell, 'you're doing great. You'll be okay, I'm sure.'

'No,' I explain carefully. 'I have just been kicked in the gut.'

Shell's boggling again.

And the Monster explodes. Reality shudders, and out of the explosion come bodies. First a few, then scores, then hundreds. They tumble over the bar, into the bathroom, out the door. They're gawky, and tubby, and cheeky, and scared. And they're all naked (bar the odd celery stick) and confused.

My grrlfriend holds the explosion tight, speaking - narrating - some kind of magic as energy flows from her.

The Doctor crawls over and under the writhing bodies towards me, still holding one hand over his face, and the other towards me. 'Jess, ' he keeps *gasping.*

I'm not looking at him though. If this is it, then I'm gonna look at her. She's beautiful and heroic and wonderful. And I'm her grrlfriend.

She stops, at last, and the explosion implodes. She dusts off her hands, then looks at me, shocked.

My eyes close.

'Well done, ' I hear the Doctor say (because hearing's always the last to go), 'but you won't have much fictional mass. '

'The Enemy have their new bodies, and I've got enough left for my life here, ' she says, holding me. Pause. 'This is what I want, ' she tells him.

My eyes open, just a little.

> *The Doctor leans over me, holding up something he pulled from his pocket. It's a babyball of the same stuff as the explosion. He grins.*

We decided on a zine. Not mundane club newsletter stuff, a prozine.

Prozine? Sounds like something Leah should be taking. Yeah, she's still hovering, we'll get around to asking her back into the fangrrl community soon enough. Maybe get her to contribute a story.

Because the zine's for charity. All the profit's going into community redevelopment, fan outreach programs, reclaim the Knight Rider. All sort of stuff.

I remember the Doctor insisting, even as I blacked out on the Tav floor, that we make sure the fanboys turn out okay this time. Keep them away from bottle universes, should do the trick. Whatever that meant.

It's something I can *do.* I can help these people adjust to their new lives, new bodies, new universe.

Can you believe it?

Next thing I know he's not regenerating. She's crying, and hell, I start crying too, the stress of the last few days spilling out. I can breathe again. He saved me.

'Can't you do something?' I ask, nestled on her shoulder.

She starts sobbing louder, and I realise she can.

'Right, right, time travel, you can -' I stammer, sitting up..

'What's a temporal orbit?' she says bitterly, then, after a long moment: 'I can save him. The universe does need him, and he'll find someone else for his taxi service. But -' she holds my face. 'Local reality's on the brink of collapse as it is. If I do this, it mightn't be safe for me any more. '

She wipes my tears with her thumb. 'Not for a while, at least. '

Oh?

Oh hell.

This is it, right? When the decision comes back to me. The life of a man who blunders his way into everything. The lives of hundreds of fanboys right now either furiously coupling or drinking. The life of two women, one alien, in love.

The decision is in my hands. Then I see where my hands are: in hers.

'Do it, ' I say, and kiss her.

So she lifts his floppy doll body, and walks backward, still looking at me, as she becomes bluer and bluer, shifting into an oblong shape. A box.

And then she's gone.

The deep blue of her presence sparks and fades.

You wear me out. Maybe I'll write a happier ending in the morning, but now we need rest.

Can't sleep though, and you feel my restlessness, don't you. I keep thinking about what she said, even though my memories of that moment are not that clear. Ha - fictional.

How long, then? A month? A year? Ten years?

You kick again. Okay, okay, I'll stop worrying. She'll come back when it's time.

You're fiction, just like your mum. But I love you all the more. Hell, aren't we all fiction, in the end? Don't us fangrrls know better than anyone how our lives are made up, out of bits and pieces from the show, and all over our culture, and that that's what we need to live with each other?

You understand, or you will soon.

And she'll love you on your tenth birthday.

Future

As we've already seen, the past is an *area* of time rather than a direction, a four-sided figure strung between our now, the homeworld's now, our own origin, and the origin of everything. The first mistake many students make is to assume that the future is of a similar design, stretching from the axis of the present to the eventual demise of the continuum (or the Terminal Event), as it's known in the newer journals). However, the truth is less pleasant.

One thing has to be remembered above all. Our species only ever perceives time as moving in one direction, despite having the freedom to move in several. We can map the past, because we can already perceive the point of our own origin, just as we can perceive the birth of the continuum itself. But the end of the universe is still beyond observable reach, although a number of travellers (all acting illegally) have suggested a number of different scenarios. And as for the moment when the traveller himself ceases to exist...

In temporal mechanics, a traveller's existence is considered to begin when he can first *observe* an event, not at birth/looming. Likewise, his existence is said to end when he can no longer continue to observe. But what remains unclear is whether this moment of non-observation means the moment of actual death; partially because the possibility of consciousness after death is a difficult field of study under any circumstances, and partially because of the inherent problems we face when dealing with the fact that Time Lord personalities are stored in the Matrix on dissolution of the flesh. Therefore, the boundaries of the future - a square with only two visible corners - can only be defined if the traveller can ascertain his own fate.

And what if he attempts to change that fate? Theoretically, this would not only change events in the future, but also the very *shape* of the future. Or at least, the boundaries within which the future can exist.

This, then, is why Rassilon laid down the in-bred protocols that prevent an observer attempting to travel along his own timeline. Should any individual discover his ultimate point of non-existence, then the nature of time itself is subject to alteration. If a member of a minor species stumbled across his own demise, the alteration would be barely noticeable, but in the case of a Time Lord (or any of the other six species which are biologically linked to the causal nexus) the damage could be beyond understanding, let alone imagining.

Or, to put it bluntly; nobody knows exactly what

> the future is, but everyone is afraid of it. If handled roughly, it may detonate.

- *Prinicipia Prinicipalis*, third item on the recommended reading list, Arcalian Chapter Pre-Academy Induction School (suggested reading age: five years, two months).

Mysterious Ways
By
Julian Eales

Traversing the Bleed was a talent which the TARDIS had taken time to learn. Fortunately, time, or Time, was something she was on intimate terms with.

If time was a river, then it eddied and rippled strangely in comparison to the familiar nature of N-Space, E-Space, Deep Time, Oblique Time, Absolute Time, High Time; her usual haunts. She only discovered the Bleed by accident, a confluence of events that conspired to bring her and her master, her partner, her *other* to this place. Their new exile, but taken up by choice this time. Perhaps choice is not entirely correct, for the Doctor had much to prepare for, and plates to keep spinning just so. It was his vocation, and he took to it as always, with gusto, whichever face he wore or appellation he chose. His name was John Smith. That was not his real name. His name was Merlin. That was not his real name. Theta Sigma, Time's Champion, The Ka Faraq Gatri, Eighth Man Bound. Mere badges he collected, of no more significance than a celery stick on a lapel. His name was the

> Doctor. It was also his profession.
>
> Much later, the planet would be known primarily as one of the Thirteen Worlds, but right now, it was content to be plain old Earth. One among countless, all different, all singing and dancing, unique and precious for that very reason. Why should the Doctor choose this Earth, this reality to make his home? It was not his birth parallel. He had no affinity for this place any more than the ones to either side, where President Clinton took her country to war, or Yoko married Ringo. It bore a passing resemblance to the Earth he had protected so many times before, but that was not enough. Perhaps he stayed because this reality had need of him. He had no opposite number to shoulder the burden, and his investigations could find no trace of his existence, much less his telltale fingerprints in Earth's history.

Night-time in the city. Crimson and chalk marred the gleam of the freshly buffed supermarket tiles, a calling card to the forces of order. Police officers clustered around the shopping aisles like flies, holding back the unruly workers, who were shuffling uneasily, desperate to witness, and to get to the meat puppet formerly giving them orders. The body had already been removed on the say so of the ranking officer. This was entirely against procedure, but he had his reasons. After a cursory inspection, it was plain that the case was outside his purview. This was no ordinary homicide. Not by a long chalk.

Inspector Jack Addison strode purposefully towards the supermarket. He was checked in his tracks by the safety cut-out feature of the rotating door, the bane of many a shopper. He cursed and gave the door a shove, forcing his way through. His companion eschewed the traditional mode of dress associated with the Police Force, looking instead more like a refugee from the sixties or perhaps a homeless man. Despite his shambling gait, he had no such trouble with the door, effortlessly gliding through it, a smile upon his lips, as if it related to a joke which only he was privy to. The Inspector had a face like thunder as he bore down on the first uniformed officer in his sight.

'What idiot told you to move the body?' he demanded, cowing the constable with a gross invasion of his personal space.

This idiot, actually.' interrupted Detective Inspector Dolmen from across the shop. As he walked over to Addison and his outlandish entourage of one, they exchanged looks of disdain. Addison didn't even try to mask it. Obviously he'd only just left training college, to look at him, but already full of the supercilious attitude they were filling the new breed with these days.

'Who the hell do you think you are, messing with my crime scene? Let me see your badge.' For a youngster, he held his ground against Addison quite well, even if he did not yet have the years to add weight to his words.

'We're the Malleus, son, and we haven't had any dinner.' Addison held up his warrant card, upon which was emblazoned the gold seal of the Witch-hammers, the motto *'Extare purus. Extare vigilans. Extare probus.',* and the hand print icon which identified him as a hard talent. A telekinetic. The battle of wills was over as the younger man's authority left him, almost audibly. Nobody in the force was entirely comfortable around the Malleus, especially around their hard-nosed leader. He wasn't called 'Giantkiller' Jack Addison for nothing. DI Dolmen attempted to restore a little credibility with a half-hearted question. 'Does your... bohemian friend have a name?'

'A name? Of course I have a name, but I don't think I want to give it to you. Why would I wish to give you power over me? Oh, no no no. That would never do at all.' The strange fellow was a little agitated, talking as much with expansive waving of hands as with his mouth. Addison waited until he could slip a word into conversation, with the practised art of someone well used to such behaviour.

'Let's just say that he's an *advisor,'* Addison turned his attention momentarily to his colleague, 'Do you want to get started while I discuss the finer points of etiquette with our friend here?'

'Why not?!' With that and a cracking of knuckles, he was off into the thick of it, pushing his way through the uniformed officers to the scene of the crime. For some reason, his appearance seemed to calm the uneasy shelf stackers, who ceased struggling against the officers keeping them from the blood and evidence. Their blank faces shifted from their normal slack expression, showing respect, or was it fear? It must have seemed like a good idea to the supermarket owners; for menial jobs, make use of zombi labour to stack shelves, clean and polish. They made ideal workers in the cold store, because they didn't need overcoats. In fact, it helped to preserve their bodies for longer periods. There were no industrial disputes, because they did whatever they were told, as long as you spoke slowly and simply. Obviously only the freshest were allowed onto the shop floor when customers may be about, and under supervision. Left unattended, they would just wander around aimlessly and get into trouble.

Because of their obedient nature, the staff supervisors had to be careful that customers didn't give them orders to jump in the freezers or shoplift for them. The initial trials were so successful that the scheme was instigated across the country. Most customers didn't notice the difference.

> In tandem, the government introduced an initiative whereby people could opt to carry a donor card, so that after their death, they could still remain productive members of society. This helped to ease the sense of loss by relatives, because they could always pop down to the shops to see their loved ones any time they liked. When they were no longer in a fit state to serve, the company paid for all funeral expenses to really send them off in style. Not many people were keen on the initiative, but there were enough to keep the shelves stocked and the floors shining.

'If I hadn't ordered the removal of the body, there was a good chance that the staff would have eaten the evidence before you got here! We have limited manpower, and as you can see,' he waved a hand towards the zombi workforce, without actually looking at them, docile as they had become, 'the natives are restless.'

Addison stabbed a finger at him accusatorily. 'If you've disturbed the spirit-link, I will not be a happy chappie, and you really don't want to see that, believe me. Now do something useful, and put the kettle on. Can you do that?'

Detective Inspector Dolmen opened his mouth to protest, but Addison was already launching another verbal assault.

'Wait a sec. Better get one of your men to do it. We wouldn't want you to burn yourself boiling the water, would we?' Addison patted him on the head like a favourite pet, sealing his victory. 'Now, where's the rest of my team? Lazy sods the lot of 'em.'

As Addison checked his watch, there was a keening in the air, as space folded back on itself again and again until something became able to push itself through from elsewhere or elsewhen. It shimmered like a mirage until it could coalesce in the middle of Aisle 3, among the breakfast cereals. The bright blue Police Box had landed in more conspicuous locales before, but not many.

'He likes to make his own way.' Addison explained.

The Doctor bustled out of the TARDIS, practically buried by the afghan coat he was sporting. For a lord of time, this incarnation seemed to be perpetually late for an engagement. He pushed, pulled and squeezed himself through the crowd of zombi workers, 'Sorry, pardon my... oops, I beg your... sorry... excuse me... Ah! Inspector! Here we are again.' He was in a perpetual state of pushing up his coat sleeves to free his arms, bedecked as they were with friendship bangles. The zombis all gazed at him in slack-jawed amazement, much like small children in the presence of a favourite TV hero. He passed by the cigarette kiosk which had been roped off as the crime scene, and greeted the slumped figure who appeared to be sniffing the blood pool. 'Hello Rysk!'

The Street Shaman shot bolt upright and put a raised finger to his lips. 'Enough with the names! Why is it always the names with you? Ears may be listening.'

The Doctor played up to him by placing his hands over the ears of the nearest zombi, which continued to stare blankly ahead uncomprehendingly. 'I don't think they're listening, do you?'

Rysk gave him a disapproving glare and went back to his work.

The Doctor seemed to just switch off the clown persona as he stepped into Addison's sphere of influence.

'Did you not bring along Jean Tynan or Nash?'

'Sorry. I took the road less ordinary. I've been away for some time.' By now, Addison was used to the Doctor's absences. He was a remarkable man, and Addison was grateful for his support, but whenever he asked what the Doctor got up to in his little trips, he always received the same answer, 'Tilting at windmills.'

Since Helen Duncan passed over, the Malleus was solely his, and he had been used to her Scots burr for counsel when things got hairy. Sure, he could still call upon her, but her voice never sounded the same issuing from Rysk's mouth, and her advice was couched in riddles. They talk of the knowledge of the dead, but some secrets remain entirely their provenance.

'So, what makes this a job for the spookshow, Inspector?' The Doctor's pet name for the Malleus never ceased to irritate Addison, but he let it go.

'From what 'chummie' here has managed to spit out, it's definitely the work of an Artist. If he'd left the body where it was, we'd be able to tell more, but as it stands, I'm hoping that Rysk can dial up the victim's revenant to point the finger. Let's take a walk.' He led the way over to the chalk shape, describing a position not usually capable by the human form in life. 'How goes it?' he asked the deadspeaker.

'Not so good, Jack. Without the body as anchor, it's not so easy.' By now, Rysk had decorated his cheeks with whorls and symbols, painted with the blood of the dead man as an aid to the summoning. Despite his best efforts, all he could trace were faint echoes of the man throughout the store. As for his spirit, there was nothing to be done. Rysk hated to admit defeat, but that was that. Of course, Addison blamed Dolmen for moving the body. 'I told you! Holy Mother! I ought to... ' He raised a fist as if to strike the Detective Inspector, but Rysk stopped him with a word.

'No! Moving the body changed not-a-thing. Whoever ended this person sliced his spirit-cord. I could feel the end of it, and the cut was smooth as the bottom of the baby,
I can say. I've passed a message to my guide, and he's smelling out the stray for me.'

'Right. While we wait for Madame Arcati to call back, I suggest we review the CCTV
tapes. Doctor? You're a people person. Have a chat with our 'witness' will you? The uniforms haven't managed to get a word out of her so far. Hardly surprising, but do what you can, eh?'

Addison indicated towards one of the shop assistants, still manning her till, since the constables had been unable to persuade her to leave it until her shift ended. She was still quite attractive in a vacant sort of way. They had obviously managed to turn her very shortly after death, before the higher brain functions had eroded too badly. You could still tell she was unliving though, and not just because of the absence of breathing. There was a faint undercurrent of decay which Nina Ricci had failed to entirely mask, and her eyes were focussed on *something,* but not the in the world before her. She clutched a tin of the supermarket own-brand baked beans, and occasionally attempted to swipe it across the barcode reader, which remained steadfastly unwilling to beep and register the purchase. The zombi girl muttered under her breath, 'Price check.'

The constable who had been trying to reason with her stood uncomfortably. He did not care for the company of the dead, and was out of patience for the task in hand. He attempted again to take the can of food from her, but she clutched at it all the more protectively, growing agitated from the struggle.

'Price check. PRICE CHECK!' She held the can aloft and pressed at the counter bell repeatedly for all she was worth.

The Doctor stepped between them and once he had attracted the girl's attention, he rummaged in one of his many coat pockets, and retrieved a can that was identical to the one she was hanging onto. He proffered it to her, and she immediately lost interest in the other, causing the officer to stumble back in surprise. She ran the can over her till, which made a satisfactory beep. The Doctor smiled widely, and produced a crumpled paper bag from another pocket.

'Hello! I'm the Doctor. Would you like a humbug?' He had discovered that jelly babies were not a wise choice of comestible to offer out in a world as superstitious as this one, and so reluctantly he switched brands. They didn't even make white chocolate mice on this Earth. She shook her head vigorously.

'On duty. Not on duty. Manager wouldn't like.'

'I don't think the manager minds any more,' He popped a striped sweet in his own mouth, 'I think you know something about that, don't you? About what happened to the manager?' He proffered the bag again, and after looking around furtively, the zombi girl took one.

One step at a time, the Doctor was able to piece together an account of the night's events. The shop was empty of customers, as it mostly was since the superstore opened on the other side of town. That explained the ratio of zombi workers to living. Obviously the shop was struggling to compete the best way it could.

When the manager was attacked beside the cigarette kiosk, as he attempted to answer a customer query, most of the zombis continued to go about their menial labours. Trish was undeniably proud as she told the Doctor of her superiority to the shelf stackers because she was clever enough to work the tills. She still had a great degree of her memories intact, and was able to retain instructions from days earlier, rather than minutes. Even among the undead, there was a pecking order, it seemed. She saw the bad man working at the manager with a blade, and knew exactly what she had to do. Her instructions were specific. If there was any sort of problem, she must contact the manager, but it was the manager who was in trouble. She had a conflict, which her limited orders had not taken into account. Paralysed by her inaction, she could only sit at her till and stare at the atrocity.

Some buried part of her mind, perhaps at the reptile level, recognised a memory of a knife, hot spears of pain and fountains of her life force pumping out of her. As she fought to hang on to the images, she unconsciously rubbed at the jagged scar tissue over her ribs, under the nylon of her uniform. Unbidden as the memory was, it was gone as abruptly. Just as well, as no good could come of a zombi fixated upon the moment of their end. No good for them, and even less to their employer.

The manager's office could be described as a pigsty, if that did not insult the pig. Battleship grey filing cabinets open with edges that looked as if they were deliberately sharpened to catch the unwary as they squeezed past. Every inch of wall space was adorned with post-it notes and scraps of paper sellotaped up, reminders of a hundred jobs to be done and queries to be answered. Something for the next poor individual to inherit, once the grapevine reached the head office. The office was a living breathing museum of outdated technology from the past forty years; a true example of the old adage 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.' In fact, it went further to add, 'If it is broke, did we need one?' The newest piece of hardware thankfully, was the closed circuit camera system, with eight screens monitoring the store night and day. Two of the screens were dark, victims of casual vandalism or day to day wear and tear.

The longer Addison and Rysk poked around in the office, the more it reinforced their belief that this was a dying operation, fed only by neglect to the point of atrophy. Give it a few more years and it would be a mummified retail corpse. The introduction of zombi workers only hastened the tomb-like atmosphere along.

Addison lifted the flap of the video recorder, fearing the worst, but his luck was in. There was a tape inside, still recording the events surrounding the cigarette booth. Addison never ceased to be amazed by the number of stores where they had forgotten to switch it on that morning, or ran out of tapes when an investigation needed a break. A million excuses and the Malleus knew every one by heart.

As closed-circuit systems went, this example was not by any means the latest model, far from it, but it was one of the early auracams, so they should be able to pick up some indicators of intent from the perpetrator. Shame they never spent the extra money on a biodata recognition system, but you couldn't have everything. At least the soundtrack was working, even if the speakers were shot. They would have to study the recording back at HQ, with the Malleus equipment.

Addison removed the videocassette and bagged it, scribbling a brief note on the evidence label. Rysk continued to nose about, digging under piles of papers, offer labels and other junk. He had just been rifling through the manager's briefcase and found his sandwiches when he suddenly wrenched his head upright, clumping himself on a low shelf.

'Oowtch! Why you have to shout like that? Some warning be nice, you know!' Rysk rubbed his head soothingly. The collision had not broken the skin.

Addison recognised that Rysk was deadspeaking to his spirit guide, one of his familial matriarchs from centuries ago. He hoped that the news was going to be good, but tempered with the cynicism of someone who knew it was unlikely.

'She says this guy has flown. Nothing left of him to track. It's like he's swallowed all up by something. Or cage. Could be soul cage. Either way, no help for us.' Rysk shrugged theatrically before retrieving the manager's sandwiches, which he stuck in his pocket.

'We don't need them for evidence.' Addison admonished.

'Who said evidence?' Rysk countered, 'I have hole in my belly that needs to shut the hell up.' He took a cursory look around the office to make sure he had not missed anything of importance, such as dessert, and they made their way back downstairs to the shop floor.

The Doctor had gained as much information from the zombi girl as he was going to, and she had polished off most of his humbugs in the process. He ran a hand through the thinning thatch of his ginger hair, to which the concept of 'combs' appeared to be alien indeed.

'Good hunting, gentlemen?' he enquired.

Rysk put his hand up in greeting, a purloined sandwich in it, which was swiftly crammed into his

maw in a single mouthful. The Shaman patted his stomach
appreciatively, wiping his greasy palms on his coat as part of the ritual. Addison produced his mobile phone and tapped in the number for his office. A few seconds later, he was through to despatch.

Addison. Who's on duty tonight? I need a psychometrist at the mortuary ASAP. Tynan? Yeah, she'll do. Tell her to pick up any residuals she can from the supermarket stabbing victim that's just been brought in. When she's done, we'll be back at the office. Cheers.' and he replaced the phone in his pocket.

The Doctor filled him in on what he'd missed and they compared notes, and came to the conclusion that they were wasting their time hanging around at the scene. There was nothing more they could do there. Besides, Rysk had finished his sandwiches and was beginning to eye the shop stock hungrily.

'Right, home James. Are you driving, Doctor, or shall I?'

'Now you see him,' Amanda Hopkins flicked a switch, 'and now you don't.' On the monitor, the auric flare disappeared, but so did the outline of the perpetrator. Hopkins was the Malleus historian, and a direct descendant of the most famous bearer of her surname, though she was not proud of her heritage. Her skin was vampire-pale, though she was as human as any among the Malleus, with one or two exceptions. The phrase 'Doesn't get out much' could have been coined just for her. Nothing short of the Four Horsemen would get her to abandon the Apocrypha, and even then, she would probably have fought them to a standstill, frail and elderly as she appeared to be.

There was no fault in the auracam, because everybody else registered normally. The zombis had auras the colour of frost, and the manager's changed from boredom blue to red anger and finally purple fear before leaching away with his life's blood. It was just the culprit who was fritzing the system. You could only see him by his aura, and it was so bright and shining that you could not look at it directly, for fear of damaging your sight. When he began to threaten the manager, his voice spoke in some arcane tongue that Hopkins had never come across. As things got heated the lens flare on the image became much worse; the entire right side of the screen became a white noise zone, supersaturated with colour.

The Doctor found it all very interesting. His ears pricked up when he heard the perpetrator speak. It was a tongue he had not heard for some time.

'Good lord! I think that's Ouranian-Barbaric...' His face showed clearly that mental cogs were turning and he was forming a plan of action.

'Iranian-what? I've never even heard of that' Hopkins challenged, pushing her spectacles higher on her nose as she addressed him.

'Ouranian-Barbaric,' the Doctor corrected, 'and I'm not surprised you haven't heard of it. It's principally a spoken magical language. I didn't think anyone remembered it any more. It's a derivation of the Daemon tongue.'

'Oh, come on Doctor! Since when have you been able to speak Daemonish?' The historian was sceptical.

'I was schooled in it by Izal himself, one of the Princes, or was he a Throne? Nice chap. Bit on the rough side, but ever so hygienic. Anyway, could you just run that last bit back again. I didn't catch half of what he said.' He indicated his finger in a circular motion as if the machine was going to obey him itself. He looked vaguely disappointed when it did not.

'The sound is really rather poor, and even this state of the art stuff can only do so much with it, I'm afraid.' Hopkins did as she was requested

The Doctor strained to hear what was being said, wincing when the soundtrack dropped off from time to time. 'Etheng.. something something Morshak.

Nohadz... blast it! Bujob Whebong.. something.. Pumheqwa.' The Time Lord looked troubled as he attempted to draw reason from the words.

'Well, what does all that mean?' Addison pushed for an answer. His jacket was on the back of a chair, his tie askew and his sleeves rolled up. They'd been working on this for hours without a break. He was aching for a cigarette, but he promised Helen he would quit, and now she had passed over, there was no way he could hide it from her. Evil old cow, extracting deathbed promises from him. That was the craving talking, Jack knew.

Tm not certain that he knows what he's saying. From what I could make out, it seems like he's doing all this in order to transform himself. That's the word Nohadz, you see. He mentions something about a vortex above, but mostly he's talking about death, renewal and transformation.'

'Transformation? Transformation into what?'

The Doctor took a sharp breath before answering. 'An angel.'

By the time the psychometrist Jean Tynan had filed her report on the supermarket manager, there had been another two killings, all with the same modus operandi. There did not seem to be any connection between victims, and no pattern to the slayings.

One was a commuter at St Pancras station, who had just taken the opportunity to relieve himself before his train arrived, only to find that he wasn't the only opportunist that day. Judging by the mess decorating the toilet walls, the culprit was quite a sculptor. The other took place only fifteen minutes later, but on the other side of town during rush hour. Could he fly? A young woman in broad daylight on a busy street, making her way to work. Lured into an alley, she was barely touched. There was not a mark on her, except for some bruising on her forearms where he had gripped her. She was still alive when he sliced off her soul from the delicate silver cord binding it to her flesh suit. She must have died from the shock, if nothing else.

Of course, nobody witnessed a thing. Do they ever? The perpetrator seemed to have the same kind of invisibility people accord to the homeless. One thing was certain. Whoever was doing this was getting more audacious and more spectacular with every slice and every whisper.

The newspapers had already got hold of the story, despite Addison's attempts to suppress it. He had enemies in high places on the job, but he would never be able to prove it. They'd even given him a name, and the kudos that gives a killer. 'King of Pain', they named him. Poetic for the sort of rag that normally comes up with 'Meat Man.'

Addison's answer was to pull in all his people, even the ones on sick leave recovering from the Sugarvirus, which had decimated the ranks a month back. The problem was, what good was divination against something that defies the Art? What good is the ability to get the victim's soul to point the finger at their killer when you can't find the souls? Worse than useless. Perhaps they had all become too reliant on this new science of detection. Leave it to the regulars. Like hell!

Rysk called in favours from every spirit in his totem bag. Tynan checked out the vibes at every murder scene, Russell Nash, the spirit photographer, at her side. Amanda Hopkins searched the Apocrypha for any reference to such powers. Papal envoy on secondment, John Silence, still wracked by the Sugarvirus, braved the cells below the Malleus headquarters, wrestling with their secrets with only the Word to protect him. Even the new recruit, Natalie Gordons, just transferred a couple of months earlier when her prophetic dreams manifested, had no solution.

Everything they did was to no avail. Addison was on the brink of throwing in the towel. Even the Doctor had no aces up his sleeve this time, and had deserted the sinking ship, taking one of his absences in the TARDIS. And then, just as

> the darkness seemed to be closing in, and the fires of faith were embers, the cavalry rode in accompanied by a wheezing and a groaning.

The TARDIS had been daubed with protective runes in order to effect materialisation in the Malleus Wabt without setting off every protective ward in the place. They were invisible while dormant, but when activated, they lit up like a Christmas tree. When the Doctor decided to join the Malleus on a more or less permanent basis, it seemed the right thing to do. When the TARDIS first traversed the Bleed, it was through a breach in space-time caused by a major ritual the Malleus had just performed and had not yet been able to enact the cleansing spell to banish the lingering after-effects. Talk about misunderstandings. John Silence had almost staked the Doctor's companion at the time, the vampire girl Amaryllis, before the Time Lord had managed to doff his hat and greet them in his usual manner.

This time there was no time for such pleasantries. The Doctor tore out of the ship at speed, carrying a piece of Gallifreyan technology not too dissimilar to a video recorder. Without pause for explanation, he began to pull out wiring from the Malleus systems, hooking it into his own device. The Malleus knew better than to interfere.

'How many dead now?' He asked as he pulled leads this way and that, untangling the mess of wiring as he went.

'Six.' Addison responded, stone-faced as always.

'Then there's no time to lose. The more he kills, the bigger his reputation grows, and the more he can accomplish. That's the most dangerous part about this reality of yours. Faith really can move mountains. If his legend spreads unchecked, we won't have a prayer of stopping him. He'll enter the realms of folklore like Jack the Ripper!' Engrossed in his work, the Doctor didn't notice that he had left the door of the TARDIS ajar. A small face squeezed through the gap and called across to him. Eyebrows were raised among the rest of the squad. This was a new wrinkle.

'Merlin? May I come outside? I'm lonely.' The boy wheedled at him, dressed in a samite robe, his voice a little fearful of the dark surroundings, but more especially fearful of the reaction he might provoke.

'No boy, you may not.' The Doctor responded curtly. 'Now stay inside as I instructed, and I'll see to you later.' Admonished, the face disappeared inside and the door swung shut. The Time Lord looked at each of his colleagues as if to dare them to comment. No one took up the challenge.

The Doctor fixed the final connection and hit a switch. Nothing happened. With a great sigh, he gave a sheepish grin and clouted the Gallifreyan device sharply. Immediately it began to replay. What reached the screen was a reconstruction of the events they had spent hours going over, though from a different angle; a TARDIS-eye view if you like.

The clarity of the image was extraordinary, and they got the feeling that this was just a fraction of how it would appear inside the Doctor's craft, but he had never let any of them inside to see. They all had their secrets to hide. None of them could cast any stones. It struck the Inspector that he now knew what was responsible for the extreme lens flash to the right of the auracam recording. From the angle of the image, it could only be the TARDIS affecting it on such a scale. He did not want to consider the ramifications of that for the moment.

The perpetrator stood clearly revealed on the screen. Hardly the terror he was being touted as. No King of Pain, he. Little more than a pimpled youth dressed in combat fatigues draped with a few plates of rusted armour. Nothing to suggest what was registering such a brilliant aura. It was John Silence who gasped. He knew the truth, though his oaths forbade him to reveal it.

'Blasphemy!' He shouted at the screen, but could not be led into further commentary, as he fell to coughing uncontrollably, his exertions in the basement catching up with him again. Rysk and Nash had to help him to the infirmary and put him to bed.

'In order to succeed, we must first believe we can.' The Doctor was giving one of his occasional pep talks, and the Malleus were in sore need of something to focus their energies on, something to hit.

Gordons yawned loudly, which seemed to sum up the atmosphere in the Wabt, the pure place where the Malleus conducted their magickal affairs. Gordons was always yawning, but that was down to the nature of her ability. Precognitive dreamers rarely got enough uninterrupted sleep to operate properly, and she was still new to the game. She had not yet been able to interpret the symbols that came to her in slumber. Now that they had a face to concentrate upon, she hoped that her dreams would be able to tell her something, anything that they could use. It would be some time before Natalie would feel like she was a useful member of the squad, rather than a hindrance. Her low self-confidence only made it worse in a realm where belief was intertwined so entirely with effect. It would come, assuming that the King of Pain was gracious enough to give them that time. Natalie was dead on her feet, so she made her apologies and made for her bunk.

'Sweet dreams, or at least productive ones.' Hopkins wished her on her way.

The Malleus went back over every scrap of evidence they had accrued on the case. It did not take particularly long. This case and a handful of others had put the lie to their official charter. They were the Malleus Pre-crime Unit, and unique in the law enforcement community, if you did not count the Americans, with their Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense. Their mandate was to make use of their gifts in order to prevent crime where possible. Recently there had been a sea change, and their role had slipped into a reaction force rather than a preventative measure. It may have started with the unleashing of the Sugarvirus, or their recurring sparring bouts with Spiny Norman. This was not the time for such reflection. They had to find the King of Pain and put him down, while that was still an option.

'We could divine the city right now, but what help would it give us when he can mask himself like that?'

'What about looking at it the other way round? If he can generate some kind of cloaking field, what would that look like? I'm betting that it registers as a blank space on the Mappa Mundi, right?' The Doctor was speaking more urgently, a sign that he was theorising ten steps further than he could articulate.

'It's possible.' Addison conceded.

Well, how many blank areas can there be in the city?'

'Little bits of zero.' Rysk offered.

'Okay, how many little bits of zero would we find? There can't be that many creatures that can blindside us, can there? Not since the Feye signed the Accords.'

Addison seemed energised by the idea and sprang into action. He swept the remnants of takeaway cartons and cans from the workspace and took charge.

'You could have something there. Rysk? Bring up the Mappa Mundi, and we'll see where that leads us.' The Street Shaman shook open a large circular cloth like a rug over the workspace. It was daubed with inks in a rudimentary map of the world, runic devices at the border. A word or two in some dead tongue and it began to shimmer with life. A fully realised representation of the world rose up from the map like a spirit ascending, hovering at waist height before the Malleus. Rysk's practised hands ran over it, bringing the focus down to the city. Addison's face fell. There were seventeen zero zones, unmappable by magick of this order. He shrugged it off, refusing to be beaten.

'We'll just have to do it by elimination. Proper policing. We know the big blankspot in Whitechapel is down to Spiny Norman, so we can scrub that. We've just got to hope that our man isn't using it for cover.'

'Can you highlight the murder sites to see if there's an emergent pattern?' The Doctor queried, and Rysk duly obliged.

There had been another three killings, yet to be reported. That brought the total number of deaths directly attributable to the King of Pain to twelve. The good news was that each site corresponded to a zero zone. This narrowed the odds down greatly, even if none of the Malleus could identify any way to link the sites that would fit with an arcane sigil or any other pattern.

'Perhaps we're looking at this the wrong way too?' Jean Tynan ventured her first contribution to the conversation in over an hour. 'To me it looks like he's deliberately trying to enhance his reputation by making each killing almost impossibly distant from the previous one. And every one seems to be more flamboyant than the last.'

'Of course!' The Doctor concurred, a major piece of the puzzle locking into place for him. 'He's building a Fiction Suit, isn't he? Stitched together from the whispers and rumour mongering of a scared populace. The more of them that believe him to have supernatural powers, the more they'll make it a self-fulfilling prophecy!'

'Where was the last murder?' He tapped his finger at Rysk impatiently for an answer.

'Limehouse. My guide tells me he opened man up like butterfly. Gave him wings of flesh made from his vitals. Pumheqwa[1] scrawled on Little Chef wall in the blood.'

> 'Limehouse. Okay, so where does that leave us to check? Camden, Canary Wharf and the Tottenham Court Road. We'll have to check them all. Tynan and Nash, get your coats and a couple of boys from uniform and get to Camden. Doctor, you take Tottenham Court Road and Rysk and I will go to the Wharf. Let's get this bastard off our backs.'

The Doctor knew that Addison had chosen the most likely location for himself, and did not appreciate being fobbed off with minor errands. He had considered ignoring the Inspector's order. It would not be the first time. The Doctor seemed to have an inbuilt aversion to following the orders of others, it had to be said. On the other hand, there was definitely a zero zone there, and there was no time to argue semantics. He had learnt lessons the hard way with the Brigadier: not to question their authority in front of the men, at least not too often.

Upon investigation, the walking null spot turned out to be a refugee from the Feye evacuation. Oberon obviously was not aware of the stowaway, or Titania would have retrieved her before the Ways were sealed after the Accord between Seelie Court and the Vodoun. The Doctor was pleased to meet up with one of the few remaining Feye, beauteous creatures of grace that they were, though surprised to find one working behind a bar.

> 'Needs must,' she had said, and apologised for not giving the traditional greeting, but she had pawned her knife for love. Her words triggered the final piece of the puzzle for the Doctor, and he made his excuses and left. He hoped that he would reach Addison's side in time.

Rysk heard the warning from his spirits just too late to side-step as the King of Pain, stronger than he appeared, brought his fists down on his head, bringing him a step closer to joining them. He collapsed like a rag doll, his final thoughts before the blackness took him were, strangely for him, not about where his next meal was coming from. He thought, 'I don't believe this,' but he did not believe it convincingly enough.

Addison had taken the precaution of bringing along his firearm, an under the counter little number, unlicensed and unregistered. Against regulations, but nobody was going to argue with the head of the Malleus, at least nobody who had ever witnessed the sights he had. Unfortunately for Jack, all the silver bullets in the clip were of no use to him now, with the King of Pain in possession of the gun, and training it in his direction. Fast. He was so unbelievably fast, and strong like you would not believe. The inspector weighed his options. He could rush him, in the hope that he was unused to handguns, but he did not fancy his chances at such short range. Besides, he did not want to bring himself within reach of those meat clubs that passed for fists. Addison decided to talk to him, in the hope that he could delay him long enough for assistance to arrive. What a time for the Doctor to pay more than lip service to his orders. Now here, at the highest point of the tallest building in Canary Wharf, they stood in stalemate. It occurred to Addison that the King had brought no victim with him this time, unless he intended to make do with him

'Bit of a nip in the air, eh? Sure you're warm enough in that metal get-up?' The youth gave no response, but shifted his stance slightly. Addison tried again. 'Why the gun?

It's not your style really is it? I thought you preferred that pigsticker in your belt.'

This got a reaction out of him.

'I wouldn't waste the blade on the likes of you, only those I make holy.' There was indignation in his voice, as if that should have been obvious to the policeman.

'So what's it all about son? Talk to me. Make me understand what you're planning.'

'It is a river which sweeps me along, but I am the river. It is a tiger which destroys me, but I am the tiger. It is a fire which consumes me, but I am the fire.' He recited it as if a litany, his eyes questing for understanding in Addison's eyes.

'I see...' Addison began, looking thoughtful. 'Of course, we could stand here quoting Borges back and forth all night, but it doesn't get us anywhere, does it?' Addison glanced in Rysk's direction as he spoke, but the shaman was still unconscious. The inspector was not the most capable of negotiators in such situations. He placed his confidence in people like the Doctor and Jean Tynan for that. All he wanted to do was thump his captor.

'I have a dream...' the King of Pain began, but was interrupted by sounds of movement from the stairwell. Addison saw the panic begin to swallow him up, and quickly stepped in to calm him down.

'Steady there. It's probably just some of my men following up. Nothing to be worried about, after all, you're the only one with a gun. Keep the gun on me... that's right. Don't concern yourself with them. Only me.' His voice had taken on a strangely soothing air, a side of the inspector rarely heard outside of private conversation with his confidante Helen Duncan. At the top of the stairs, a face momentarily peered round and ducked back.

'It's okay. Come out slowly and go into the light where you won't spook our friend here.' Addison said, all the time keeping his eyes pierced to his captor's. He was surprised to discover that their guests were John Silence and Natalie Gordons. He presumed that her dreams had finally told her something useful, and Silence probably bullied her into bringing him along, or sweet-talked her with those big brown eyes of his. He continued speaking to the man with the gun.

'You were about to tell me about your dream... can I have your name? I'm not going to call you by the name the papers saddled you with.'

The youth shook his head.

'No names, or it won't work. I have to keep my anonymity.'

'Then just tell me about the dream, okay?' Addison edged a little closer to him, hoping that he was moving slowly enough not to attract attention to what he was doing.

'A dream of flying. I know it's how I'm supposed to be. It's an accident I was born this way. Now I have a way to fix that.' His eyes blazed with zeal, and he ran his hands over the tarnished metal of his armour, charred and impact-marked as it was.

Silence's eyes narrowed as he spoke up, looking not at the man, but his vestments. 'I dream of falling.' He fell silent again, having said his piece. Natalie felt left out, so she joined in the confessions.

'I dreamt once that I was stuffing dolls in a stocking and smashing them against a wall. Buggered if I know what that meant...' Her words tailed off as she realised that it was not really the time for such conversation.

No one heard the TARDIS materialise, because the Doctor arrived before any of them, including the King of Pain. He merely waited until all the players were on stage to make his entrance. He insinuated himself into the group without alarming the gunman, with a grace that belied his gawky frame. When he began to speak, it was as if he had always been there. No one started at the sound or questioned his presence.

'It's your time. Time to take your place, isn't it?'

The King of Pain looked directly at him, the one who understood. 'Yes! The time of Nohadz is here and now. All I must do is slough off this wretched Richfetavdedaz and enter the suit I have forged by Choyofaque, the Great Work.'

'It will kill you!' Silence shouted, his voice cracking with his exertions. 'This must not be. It is an abomination before the Lord.'

'I will be renewed, in a form befitting my primal essence. I believe this, and you will acknowledge truth.'

'I will not. You are not fit to set your feet within the cloisters of the Eternal City. This shall not be.' Silence found his strength of will as his body buckled beneath him.

The Doctor moved between them in intercession.

'I believe you have Pumheqwa nature. But you must put down the weapon. Nothing good will come of its use.' He held out his hand for the gun. The King of Pain hesitated, keeping it squarely aimed at Addison's head. The Doctor kept his hand open to receive it nonetheless. 'There are no bullets in that gun.' The Doctor stated calmly, eyes locked with the youth's.

'Of course it's loaded! I checked myself. He put silver bullets in it. Did he think I was a werewolf or something?' The youth was credulous. Addison continued to slowly inch closer while his attention was on the Doctor. Perhaps he could buy him enough time to make a move..

The Doctor persisted, hand still outstretched, 'The gun is empty.' His eyes were a tranquil sea green, turning grey with the hint of an oncoming storm. Addison began to bunch his muscles ready for an assault. This was going to work, going to... The King of Pain pulled the trigger.

After the sixth attempt, he stopped squeezing the trigger. Somehow, despite the evidence of his own eyes, the gun had become unloaded. Addison was as dumbfounded as his captor. What was intended to be a heroic lunge turned into sitting down heavily on his rear. The Doctor took the gun from the King of Pain and purposefully placed himself between him and the assembled ranks of the Malleus. Rysk was finally awake, rubbing the lump on the back of his head the size of Cornwall. He glared balefully at his tormentor, a curse on his lips dating back to the first generation of his family. Jack Addison picked himself up and dusted himself down ready for a spot of violence. Only Gordons and Silence had other concerns. Natalie was trying to make the exorcist comfortable on the floor, using her jacket as a makeshift pillow to prop him up to help his ragged breathing.

The Doctor held his hands up in supplication, trying to stop anything from erupting between the two parties. 'Nobody else has to die today. Everybody just has to remain calm, and we can work this all...'

'One more.' the King of Pain stated, and took his athame from his belt, and plunged it into his own chest, mixing his life with those the blade had been forged to imprison. The Doctor reached out, too late to prevent it. His face creased with sorrow, anger or something between. His knuckles whitened as he balled hands into fists.

'You weren't supposed to do that! You were supposed to come quietly, so that there could be some kind of closure. A term in prison and the public would know every detail of your tiresome, drab little existence.'

'And now, I'm immortal...' gargled the King of Pain through red broth covered lips. 'Am I Pumheqwa... an angel yet?'

'Almost.' The Doctor wore his sadness like a cloak to warm himself. He knelt by the youth as his time neared, giving what succour he could during the transition, as others had done for him so many times before. Where the blood touched the armour, it restored it to its former state, and it began to shine like brightest daylight, though night surrounded them still. When the light became too intense, the Doctor was forced to step back from it, as it engulfed the body entirely. Was this regeneration? It bore similarities with the Gallifreyan function, though he was clearly not of that race.

The King of Pain struggled to stand, as his angelic armour reactivated its systems, using his mortal shell as fuel for the task. Finally it reignited halo and wings of cold flame. No longer capable of human speech, it settled for a smile of triumph. Ripping its way into being above them, a swirling vortex of rainbow colours manifested, drawing the King of Pain towards it. When he had gone, the image of that terrible smile remained Cheshire Cat-like, burned on the retinas of every witness.

John Silence was mortified by this turn of events. It turned his beliefs on their head.

That is not what I call a good result.' Addison stated bluntly, disappointment etched all over him, from his slouched shoulders to sagging legs.

'Any one you walk away from, good result. Let's go eat.' Rysk concluded.

The Doctor stood musing. Had he somehow lent the ability to regenerate to another person? If that were the case, he would have to be more careful in future. And as for the King of Pain, had they rid this world of him, only to allow him to menace another?

The former King of Pain approached his destination. The suit must have been preprogrammed with flight information, so he just let it do all the work. As the end of the vortex rushed towards him, he could see the Silver City before him, exactly as his dreams had shown. He would approach the gateway, the guardian angel would wave him through and his will be done, forever and ever amen.

But the guardian barred his way, a polearm remaining between him and the Eternal City, and the others just beyond the gateway. This was not the way it was meant to be. He was promised! He tried to keep his reserve, but his indignation rose up, infesting his aura with greens and reds, sullying the purity of his flame. The guardian sniffed at him, unsure of what it had on its hands. Finally, it was satisfied and the gate swirled open to allow him egress. His new family awaited him over the threshold. He went to embrace them, feeling just the slightest of resistance as he stepped over the veil. Each of them circled him, smelling deeply of the strange new arrival, with its unfamiliar behaviour and alien scents. Its armour was passingly familiar, but it did not make the proper greeting display. Their movements grew faster and faster, weaving in and out of each other as they hugged and stroked at him, all the time those beatific smiles upon him. Then the first of them drew blood, or the aetherie substitute for such. It seemed to drive the rest into a shark-like frenzy, tearing at him, slicing away his newly recreated essence. There was nothing to hold him together any more. What?

What had he done wrong?

Memories to Forget
By
Barry Williams

Amaryllis had never been as hungry as this. It was a physical pain that gnawed at the centre of her being. She'd been hungry, too, in the empty void where she had been imprisoned for so long, but that was a different type of sensation - as if she'd been so thinly stretched, there was nothing left any more. That had been tolerable. After a while, she'd lost herself to the point where she did not know who she was any more. When she had reacted to anything, it had been entirely out of instinct. She still had all of her mental processes this time.

That was not a blessing.

The Doctor sat at the other end of the cell, staring grimly at the wall. In his current incarnation, he wore a surprisingly youthful body, thin and almost gawky. His features were sharp, but usually lively and intelligent, softened by a light dusting of freckles. His dark hair stood out from his head in all directions in wiry confusion. His dark frock coat and flamboyant bow tie were covered in dust. He'd barely moved or spoken since they had first been captured. In all of that time, she had felt no emotions from him. She had felt no emotions from anywhere at all. It was like a dead silence, threatening to pull her down into the earth with its intensity. Even her own emotions had become deadened under this weight, gradually flattening out until there was nothing left.

It was only on the ninth day that she realised she was starving to death.

She had confronted him in the TARDIS shortly after they left Churchtown. Since the ultimately tragic turn of events there, he had taken to working alone in obscure parts of the TARDIS, muttering about Time Vector Co-ordinates' - a phrase she was sure he had made up for her benefit. She began to get the impression he was avoiding her. They both knew why.

When she finally cornered him, he was positioned determinedly under the console.

'Doctor,' she said, 'we both know what you did.'

He slid out from where he was working, and looked up at her quizzically. 'Eh?'

Amaryllis glared down at the Doctor. In appearance, she was an attractive woman in her late twenties, although she knew herself to be much, much older than that. Framed by long, reddish hair, she had a strong face with icy blue eyes, which she knew she could use to freeze people to the spot and make them feel as if she was looking into their souls.

The irony being, of course, that she quite often was.

'That Sontaran. You caused his death. You deliberately allowed him to go into a trap.'

The Doctor stood up rubbing his hands on an oily rag - probably for appearances' sake. 'Amaryllis, I had no choice...'

'You had every choice.'

'He was a Sontaran!'

'He behaved with honour! Which is more than you did.'

They glared at each other for a moment. An impasse had been reached. Amaryllis realised it was time she made her announcement.

'Doctor, I want to leave.'

The Doctor paused in his constant hand rubbing and looked up at her. 'You what?'

'I have to go. I'm not sure I understand your morality any more.'

He shrugged. 'All right. As soon as we land somewhere suitable, I can drop you off.'

Amaryllis gazed at him in astonishment. She wasn't sure what kind of reaction she'd been expecting, but it wasn't this. 'You don't care, do you?'

He looked at her, blankly.

This incensed her even more. 'Is that all? I don't even get a 'sorry to see you go, Amaryllis'?'

'You know I shouldn't be travelling with a Vampire,' he said. 'It is very awkward. If my people found out...'

'Oh fine. If that's all I am to you. I just thought... after all we've been through, that perhaps you might feel some, I don't know, at least friendship for me! I thought you'd miss me when I went, but perhaps I was being vain.'

The Doctor didn't say anything. He just stared at the console in silence.

Amaryllis waited for a moment in case there was something more - some kind of explanation. None was forthcoming.

She turned on her heel and left.

That had been nearly a fortnight ago. All of her impulsively acquired principles had brought them here. Trapped. Imprisoned in a primitive Tnuk village.

Another pang of hunger ran through her body, and she moaned. She felt as if she had lost a sense - gone deaf or blind. In a way, she had.

For the first time in many hours, the Doctor looked up at her. 'You're hungry,' he said.

'Oh, so you do care, then?' She gritted her teeth.

He didn't answer directly. Instead, he cocked his head to one side. 'Does it hurt?'

'If you look at it from a certain point of view... yes, it damn well hurts.'

He nodded. 'If this happened again, and someone put you through this pain... and they promised to take it away if you would only betray me... would you do it?'

That gained her full attention. From his end of the cell, he was simply gazing at her, his face holding neither accusation nor pity - not even curiosity. She tried to sense his feelings, but of course there was nothing.

'What is this meant to prove?'

'I just wondered.'

To end the pain? 'Yes,' she said, 'I'd betray you.'

'Ah.' He leant back. 'At least you're honest.'

She looked at him. 'Have I shocked you?' she asked.

'No. I'm not shocked. I've lived too long and seen too much to be shocked by betrayal.'

'Of course, you're quite familiar with it,' she said, remembering the events in Churchtown.

'Yes,' he whispered, 'I am.'

It had all seemed so simple when they landed outside the stockade. The Doctor had bustled around the console with the air of a concerned but doting parent. He ran a hand through his unruly hair.

'Well,' he said. 'That all seems safe enough. Shall we take a look outside?'

'Doctor,' said Amaryllis, 'do you even know where we are?'

'Oh,' he shrugged, 'somewhere in your galaxy, I think. Come on!'

And he rushed out like a boy about to get a bag of sweets.

Shaking her head in exasperation, Amaryllis followed.

It was thick forest outside the TARDIS, and the high wooden wall of the stockade. The Doctor was standing next to it, holding his finger up as if to test the wind. 'Do you still want to leave?' he asked, suddenly.

'Yes,' she responded, wary.

'Hm. Let's see if the natives are friendly.'

He winked, and led the way along the wall until they came to an entrance. Inside the stockade was a village, quiet and well tended.

'Well this looks very nice,' said the Doctor.

A bit primitive,' Amaryllis pointed out.

'Appearances aren't everything,' he muttered.

To her surprise, he walked straight into the middle of the village as if he owned the place. To her greater surprise, she followed. He stood at the centre. 'Anybody home?'

'I don't think there's anyone here,' she said, 'I...'

She hesitated. Slowly she turned around. Thick-built, brutish figures had appeared as if from nowhere, all around them. Something about them looked familiar.

Before Amaryllis could warn him, the Doctor had strode up to the nearest one, his hand held out in greeting.

'Hello,' he said, 'I'm -'

'Run, Doctor!' she screamed. 'Run!!'

She'd turned to go herself at that point, but found the entrance to the village already blocked by the heavily built creatures.

Behind her, the Doctor leapt into retreat, but was clubbed to the ground and kicked until he stopped moving. Amaryllis herself froze - it was pointless to resist.

She was drifting in and out of sleep. She didn't have the energy any more to be quite sure what was real and what was dream.

It was hot inside the hut, but she felt a cold breeze, and shivered suddenly. That was odd, except that she wasn't in the hut. She was standing by a window, holding her father's hand. The window ran from the ceiling to the stone floor, and was high above the ground outside. Her father towered over her like a giant. He wore robes of black and red, but she could not make out any details in his face. She was only five years old.

Her father smiled down at her reassuringly. 'Look outside, little one. See?'

Outside their castle, there was snow everywhere - she could see it all the way down the valley. On this planet, the cold season lasted for twelve standard years. Winter was all little Amaryllis had ever known. Working out in the snow were people. Amaryllis knew they were different from her, but she wasn't sure how.

'Men, Father,' she said, hoping he would take this as a request for further information.

He did. 'Yes, they are called humans.'

'Humans.' She tried the word out for size. 'Are we humans?'

'No, we're not.'

'But they look like us.'

'I know. You will learn the difference soon.'

Her father crouched down until his eyes were at the same height as hers. He stared into them intently.

'You must remember, my daughter. They are good people. But you are better than them. Always remember.'

The Doctor had woken up minutes after first being dumped inside the cell. Amaryllis tried not to see the bruises discolouring his face. 'In future, Amaryllis,' he wheezed, 'can I be the one who decides when to say 'run'?'

'You don't understand these creatures, Doctor.'

'I could have won their trust!'

Amaryllis shook her head. 'Not the Tnuks.'

He sighed, and went over to the door of their cell. Like all of the other huts, it was made of wood, with an inner floor that was sunk into the ground. The solid-looking door had been tied shut somehow on the outside - probably with a particularly strong length of vine. The Doctor tested it a few times, anyway. 'The Sonic Screwdriver won't help me, here,' he said. 'All right, tell me about the Tnuks.'

The Tnuks were genetically-engineered warriors, designed by humans to fight Emotional Vampires - Amaryllis' own people. Uniquely, they transmitted negative emotional responses. This not only meant that Amaryllis' kind could not feed from them, but they also had an emotional dampening effect on everything around them. Humans would not notice the difference, and suffered no ill effects, but with Emotional Vampires, it was different. For a start, the Tnuks could not be sensed by her kind - this was why she had thought the village was empty. If the humans wanted to launch a surprise attack on the Vampires, they sent the Tnuks. The Tnuks were savage, and very difficult to kill. They were also single-minded to the point of mania, and bred to hate all Vampires.

They hunted down my kind one by one, until we were all gone,' Amaryllis concluded.

The Doctor nodded, his lips pursed thoughtfully. 'I have some knowledge of those times.'

'Really? How?'

He began to look uncomfortable. 'That doesn't matter, now. The problem is, they have highly suspicious natures. They may not realise that you are a Vampire, but they know something is wrong. And they won't let us go until they find out what it is.'

'Doctor, if they find out what I am, they'll kill me.'

'I know,' he said. 'I know.'

When Amaryllis first met the Doctor, it had been like waking from a dream. She'd had a dream recently with... her father? It was fading fast, now.

Amaryllis was not her real name, of course. It was a name she had just picked out of a book, more-or-less at random, shortly after she and the Doctor had met. She could not remember her real name, or very much about the life she had left behind when she had been taken from her planet. She knew it had been a colony world, an offshoot from Earth.

Had she ruled there at one time, or had the colonists simply mistrusted the Vampires? She was not sure. It all seemed so hazy. Whether the revolution had been political mattered little to her now. It was the same everywhere for her kind. They had been feared and misunderstood - even wiped out in some places. It was no use arguing with humans that she did not suck blood; that she was only an Emotional Vampire. Just the word was enough to make them afraid. She had been put on trial for her 'crimes' and banished, but even this had not gone to plan.

The Doctor had rescued her from an empty void, populated by characters generated from her own imagination and three books stored in the computer of a defunct spacecraft. This hollow world with its unreal people had kept her alive, but that was almost all.

> 'Amaryllis' she had called herself. It was just a name. It was not her. But it would do for now.

Every day, they brought in two small bowls of fruit, which they laid in front of the Doctor and Amaryllis. The Doctor ate his slowly and in silence, while Amaryllis left hers untouched. To avoid suspicion, the Doctor took to eating her portion as well.

Neither of them said anything about this. Her habits were almost a taboo subject between them. He had agreed to take her with him because she had nowhere else to go. This didn't mean he was happy about it. He explained how his people, the Time Lords, had sworn to kill any Vampires they came across. Having her as a companion made him uneasy, to say the least.

She had thought he might have got over that by now, but apparently not.

The Doctor had said she could feed on him as long as it was sparingly - another thing they never talked about. Except that now she could not even do that. She was getting no sustenance at all. She began to see the world though a thin haze, as if it was a few feet further away than it had been. She could feel herself growing less substantial day by day. What happened when one of her kind starved to death? Would she simply cease to exist?

'Doctor,' she said, faintly.

He looked at her, almost blankly, as if the dampening field of the Tnuks were affecting him, too.

'Doctor, you have to tell them. Tell them what I am.'

His eyes widened. 'No!'

'Listen... Listen to me.' Her voice sounded like ashes. 'I won't be able to think straight for much longer. I'm going to die anyway. You must tell them... what I am while I'm still here. That way they might let you go. If you stay silent... If the slightest suspicion attaches to you, they'll just hold you here forever. Forever. I know what they're like.'

'Amaryllis,' he was at her side. 'You know I can't do that.'

'You must!' Her voice was stronger, now. 'If you don't tell them, I will.'

'Amaryllis... Listen, the Tnuks are the product of Time Lord technology. We helped the humans. They could never have developed them on their own.'

She shook her head. 'That doesn't matter now. Will you tell them?'

He hung his head. 'Yes. Yes, I'll tell them.'

They were in the centre of the village. The Tnuks had tied her, upright, to a stake. This was just as well, as she was too weak to stand. Around her feet was a pile of suspiciously dry wood. The Doctor stood to her right, his hands tied behind his back.

'I never had you down as the self-sacrificing type, Amaryllis,' he said from the corner of his mouth.

'Who was it who said that it's better to burn out than fade away?'

They both watched the Tnuks who surrounded them. They were tall and broadly built, with thick, grey skin. Their bald, lumpen heads contained only narrow slits for eyes and mouths - it was impossible to see any expression on their faces at all, certainly no emotion of any kind.

Quite how this band had separated from human hegemony was a mystery, but they seemed to have developed some kind of primitive culture of their own. The majority simply stood in a circle, staring at the Time Lord and Vampire, but one of them wore some kind of ceremonial poncho and was waving a painted stick in their faces while humming sonorously. Amaryllis was painfully aware that two more stood at the back, carrying flaming brands.

At last, the ceremony seemed to be over. The two Tnuks with fiery torches stepped forwards. This was it.

Until the Doctor stepped in their way. 'Good day,' he said, 'I want... to tell a story.'

Ten years ago, it had been winter. Now it was spring. Young Amaryllis felt the irony of this as she turned around on a rocky outcrop and watched the castle - her home - burning to the ground. It blazed against the night sky like an angry torch, lighting the fields around.

Next to her, the servant, Mantrus, grabbed her elbow in the flickering darkness. 'We must go, Madam,' he said, urgently. 'If we stay here, the Tnuks will find us.'

'My family was in there,' she said. 'My entire family.'

Mantrus nodded. 'Yes. Yes, I know. But if we don't go now, they'll get us, too!'

Being able to sense and amplify emotions - even distort them - had given the Vampires a long advantage over the humans. On occasion, they had used this for their own benefit. Perhaps they had been wrong to do so.

Normally, they felt safe. Humans could not approach their homes without them knowing they were there. A surprise attack was unthinkable. That is, until the Tnuks came.

Amaryllis' father had known what was coming. Other Vampire families had already been wiped out. Their possessions had been stacked up in boxes, ready to evacuate. A chartered spaceship was on its way now to the burning ruins.

The attack had come during the night. About a dozen Tnuks, she guessed. Emotionally silent, physically invulnerable and temperamentally vicious. Her family had not stood a chance. Only she and Mantrus had escaped.

Amaryllis shook her head. 'We were always so kind to the village. I thought they liked us. That time Mother cured Mrs Redland's daughter...'

They were always afraid,' said Mantrus. 'Just waiting their chance.'

'But... why? I know they had some newcomers recently, making trouble, but...'

'Madam! We must go!'

'I'll be back,' she said. 'One day.'

'I know. But come along. We must go, quickly!'

Mantrus led her up to the ridge and across into land where she had never been before.

Amaryllis could not believe that they had actually gone along with it. She had expected the Doctor to get his head kicked in just for interfering, but they had treated this event as if it was an appropriate part of the ceremony. Now they were all sitting in a big circle, watching them, almost expectantly.

The Doctor coughed. 'There was once,' he began, 'a young lady by the name of Lesley Westbrook. She was a friend of mine... for a while. In many ways, she was an extremely ordinary person where she lived, but I could see in her something more... So much potential. She had a bright future ahead of her. Until she met me, that is.

'I met her shortly after my last regeneration. I was confused and in trouble, and she helped me, when most people would have run away and left me to my fate. I took her travelling with me. It wasn't her choice, but I thought she would enjoy seeing a bit more of the universe, that she would benefit from her experiences. I'd done it many times before. I was so certain, so arrogant, that I didn't even ask her if she wanted to go. She only came into the TARDIS because I told her that I'd lost the key to her car somewhere inside.

'As soon as she was on board the TARDIS, I took off, and set it in a completely random direction. When we landed... it was in the middle of a Cyberman invasion. I let her go wandering off by herself. The next time we met, she was already dying from poison they had put inside her system. I thought I could save her. I thought I could do anything at that time. I failed. Miserably.

'After that... I changed. You see, I killed her.

'She died for no reason. Nothing she did on that day made any difference to the outcome. She had no reason to be there. She shouldn't have been there. I'd taken her out of time against her will. She didn't have to die that day, but she did - because of me, and me alone. She didn't even get to see the universe I'd promised her.'

The Doctor sighed and hung his head. 'You see, I'd lied to her,' he said. 'I had her key in my pocket all the time. I have it here.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out a key. It twinkled in the firelight as it hung from his hand. Everything about it looked completely ordinary. The Doctor put it back in his pocket - as if he always kept it there.

'Since then... I no longer go out of my way to combat evil. If I can find any way just to get myself out of a situation with the minimum number of people getting hurt... then I'll take it. And to Hell with the bigger picture.

'If people travel with me, it's at their own risk. They can come or go as they like. If I have to make a choice between the deaths of many, and the deaths of a few... then I'll make that choice. But only when I have to. If people want to kill each other, then that's up to them. I don't have the right to interfere.

'Lesley taught me that. I should have learnt it a lot earlier.'

He paused. Amaryllis could sense a change in the atmosphere within the circle. There was an emotion coming from somewhere - strong, and complex. Was is coming from the Tnuks? No, it had to be the Doctor, but... there was too much, far too much to be coming from just one person.

Unless the presence of the Tnuks was reflecting that emotion back on itself, amplifying it until, trapped within the circle, it became a raging cyclone of feelings. Amaryllis could feel it all around her, but she left it for the moment, letting it build. And build.

Then, when she was ready, she took it, focused its force -

- and flung it right back out again.

A million different suns opened inside her head and everything in existence blasted out of it.

For about two whole seconds, until she came around again.

She was lying several feet away from where she had been tied up, and the Doctor was bending over her in concern. She fed off that concern, building her strength up rapidly.

They won't be out for long,' he said. 'I suggest we get out of here.'

She looked across to where the Tnuks were lying in various prone positions. Some of them were already stirring.

Amaryllis stood up, quickly. 'Let's get back to the TARDIS,' she said.

'Right,' the Doctor began to hurry away.

'And one more thing.'

He turned. 'Yes?'

'Walk, don't run.'

Later on, she asked how he had got the Tnuks to stop and listen to them like that. He had just shrugged. 'It's a Time Lord thing. They never build a weapon they can't control themselves, so I knew there had to be a key to their psyches. If I'd known the proper control words, I could probably have had them eating out of my hand. As it was... well, storytelling has a very strong tradition on my planet. I knew that if that didn't have any effect on them, then I was barking up completely the wrong path.'

'What about that burst of emotion at the end? That wasn't me.'

'I was using the story to focus my mind. All the time I was probing them. I guessed there must be some frequency at which they were vulnerable. Something their antiemotions could not work against. Due to their natures, their tolerance against that kind of attack was surprisingly low.'

'So another Time Lord trick?'

'A lucky guess,' he corrected.

She nodded, yawned and stretched. 'I need a bath,' she declared.

'I'll see if I can find somewhere more suitable to drop you off, if you like.'

Amaryllis hesitated. 'You know...' she said, 'I think I will stay a little bit longer, after all. If that's all right with you.'

He looked at her for a moment. Then he smiled. 'Pleased to hear it,' he said.

Walking up the valley was a girl.

She was 17 years old. Spring on this planet had turned into summer, which at least meant that there were more people out and about for her to steal emotions from.

Glutted, she made her way back up into the hills. Snow still lay on the highest peaks, but she knew that that too would melt in a couple of years time. The sun was strong, and she took the time on her walk to enjoy it - another thing that the humans did not understand about her kind.

At the top of the ridge, the slope dipped back down again into a secluded high valley. There were old mine workings here, long-abandoned and sealed off with wooden boards. Not far from the workings was a tiny worker's village - two rows of slate cottages, also empty and abandoned - or almost. Amaryllis stopped dead when she saw it.

Normally, she would be getting some emotional resonances by now, but today she felt nothing.

She dropped the firewood she was carrying, and broke into a run.

The cottage at the centre of the left row still had a door. The last time she had seen it, it had been neatly closed, but now it was hanging off its hinges. Inside, the hut was cold and dark. She could finally sense a presence, but only very faint. Slowly, she stepped through the door, afraid of what she might see.

Mandrus had been staked to the back wall. He was

held in position by a single shaft
of wood, straight through his chest - where most humans would assume his heart would be. He was still alive, but only barely.

Amaryllis ran to his side, her young eyes filling with tears.

'Mandrus, Mandrus...' she stammered.

His eyes fluttered open at the sound. 'Oh,' he said, 'I... I was waiting for you.'

'Who did this to you?'

'That doesn't... matter. What does matter is... Promise me... Promise for me and all your family...'

'Yes?'

'Revenge us. Revenge us on all humans.[1] Slowly, the life seeped out of his eyes. 'Promise... me....' His head sagged against his chest.

'I will,' she said, her voice cracked with emotion. 'I'll take revenge for you... on all humans.'

Touching Indigo
By
R. J. Anderson

I suppose it wasn't the best introduction. For a couple of weeks after it happened, every time I thought about it I felt fuchsia all over, tasted humiliation hot and bitter on my tongue. I even found it hard to meet his gaze; I kept expecting the quivering, gelid shapes of embarrassment, or the filthy rags of disgust. But they never came.

I think maybe that made it worse.

But as usual, I'm getting the story backwards. I get a lot of things backwards, actually. That's why I happened to be where I was when I found him, or he found me, or somebody else found both of us. (I'm still not sure which one really applies, and probably I'll never know.)

To begin at what most people think of as the beginning, the city of Sudbury is (or was, or will be) a loose tangle of concrete, asphalt, and hopeful landscaping dropped into the heart of a gigantic asteroid crater. The Sudbury Basin, as they call it, is riddled with nickel, which is the only reason the city came into existence in the first place. The local government seems to find this embarrassing, however, and spends considerable sums of money on development in the hopes that people will forget it. To be fair, it almost works. Sudbury's the kind of place you can learn to like as long as you weren't born there.

I was born there.

About twenty kilometres outside the city, off Highway 69, there's a gravel side road which, like nearly every other road in that area, leads to a couple of deep, cold, rock- bottomed lakes and a few summer cottages. It also leads to a place very few people know about, and those who do know usually pretend they don't.

It is called, euphemistically, a retreat centre, and at first glance it seems to fit all the qualifications: whitewashed buildings and too-perfect gardens, the obligatory wooden footbridge over a gurgling stream, screened-in gazebo, shuffleboard, the works. However, to remain in this idyllic setting for any length of time, one has to meet a rather exacting set of standards.

Unfortunately for me, I qualified. Pine Hills is a home for the criminally insane, and after ten years of weird drugs and the occasional electroshock treatment, I almost deserved to be there.

I used to blame my parents. Hate them, actually.

But when I think about it now, they could hardly have done anything else. After all, I couldn't possibly have been telling the truth about what happened to David, and considering that I was already seeing a psychiatrist for what my mother (with typical understatement) called 'AM's little problem,' the answer must have seemed obvious. Still, shouldn't they have wondered, at least a little, when they couldn't find the body?

But I digress. Suffice it to say that I was a prisoner at Pine Hills, 'unresponsive to counselling' (meaning that I refused to change my story) and 'displaying violent behaviour patterns' (such as tearing the paper off the walls in the lobby, and smashing a nurse's watch). I was given lots of sedatives and anti-depressants, which I took when they were watching me and flushed down the toilet when they weren't. The doctors never seemed to understand that taking the pills actually made my 'little problem' a lot worse; it was like having to watch an endless reel of 'Yellow Submarine' with the sound backwards and the picture upside down.

I didn't have many visitors. My parents came once a month, greeted me with desperate cheerfulness, and brought me gifts: music that smelled disgusting, dresses

in colours that burned or froze, food that made

> the wrong sounds. I thanked them, and hid the boxes in the closet. The first year I was at Pine Hills, my uncle came too, but on the third visit I had to beg him to take off his tie because it was shouting at me, and he never came back after that.

One thing I will say for Pine Hills is that it had a good library, and for me books were generally safe. Reading Hemingway was like ducking machine-gun fire, and Joyce was a positive zoo; but I found solace in Forster's chamber music and the quiet metronome tick of Jane Austen. Also, the library was papered in subdued shades of blue which, even when I was drugged, never made enough noise, or tasted bad enough, or felt cold enough, to disturb my reading. At first the librarian kept a nervous eye on me whenever I came in, but when he realised I wasn't going to tear the place - or him - apart, he relaxed and left me alone.

Which was how it happened.

He'd gone off for a coffee, locking me in so that none of the other patients could wander into the library unsupervised and make a mess of things, and I was wallowing knee-deep in Titus Groan, so I didn't notice the sound until it flapped over my head and crashed into the far wall. I dropped the book and glanced around wildly before I realised what was going on; then I sat back and closed my eyes, trying to force myself to hear.

What I got first was a smell, unlike anything I'd ever smelled before. It smelled like someone in a woolly sweater sitting in front of a very expensive computer they'd just switched on, reading an antique book and munching buttered toast. Then my ears woke up belatedly and informed me that a thirty-year-old horse with severe bronchitis was standing in the library storage room, coughing into a megaphone.

Since this was clearly too bizarre to be the case, I resigned myself to go and have a look. I went to the storage room door and tried to turn the knob. It was, not surprisingly, locked, so I went back to the desk, grabbed a paperclip from the tray, bent it straight and picked the lock on the middle drawer, which provided me with the necessary set of keys. I walked back to the storage room, tried the first key that came to hand, and the door, with a reproachful click of its tongue, opened.

There was no one in the room. Rows of metal shelves, painted the colour of week- old porridge, obscured the view to my right; to my left stood a line of filing cabinets in khaki, stiffly awaiting my inspection. I ignored them and walked down the aisle to the back of the room as the wheezing sound died into silence.

I found myself staring at what seemed to be a generously proportioned telephone booth, made of wood and painted an official shade of blue. It was windowless, but all four sides - or so I assumed, though since it was standing in the corner I could only see two sides - were inset with wooden panels. One of the panels on the front appeared to be hinged, and bore a greying notice reading 'Call Here for Help'. I picked at the edge of the panel for a while, mentally cursed myself for having bitten off all my fingernails, and gave up.

The sign just above me said POLICE BOX. I'd never seen anything of the sort in Sudbury, and I was pretty sure I wouldn't find one anywhere else in Canada either. What it did remind me of, very slightly, was a transplanted British phone box I'd seen once at the Eaton's Centre in Toronto. That one had been red, and had glass panels, but...

Okay. Assuming I was right, what was a British Police Box doing in the back room of an asylum in Northern Ontario? And where had those noises come from? I was beginning to pride myself on my systematic approach to this mystery; I hadn't felt so lucid in years. Just standing beside the box made me feel stronger, clearer-minded, almost in control.

I really shouldn't have let myself think that,

however, because the moment the notion passed through my mind, my senses rebelled. I'd been standing with both hands pressed against the doors of the box, pushing lightly to see if they would open.
Suddenly I was wrapped in warm wool, feeling the silicon crackle and buzz beneath my fingers, breathing in the musty smell of leather and old parchment, biting into the crisp surface of the toast and tasting hot butter running over my tongue. It was overwhelming, yet comforting at the same time, like being bear-hugged by somebody's grandfather. I clung to the box, pressing my cheek to it, and braced myself for the second wave.

Nothing, however, could possibly have prepared me for what came next. I drowned in the sheer blueness of the box, while every ounce of fear, confusion, and anger washed out of my body. Wiped clean, I drifted into comprehension of a new personality: detached, inscrutable, dauntingly intelligent, yet at the same time friendly, kind without condescension, and laced with wry humour. It was everything I'd always felt about indigo, and more.

It was also, I realised as my other senses switched in and began flinging information at me, male. The box was permeated with the ineffable essence of a gender different from mine, and yet the redolence was subtle, as though it were a matter of no particular consequence. There was also a curious multiplicity about the personality I was discovering, as though it were made up of layers, like an onion. I don't mean emotional layers - we all have those. I mean layers of existence, states or stages of being. In this case, each one had a subtly different fragrance, so I could count them. There were eleven.

My fingers traced the crack between the police box's doors. Behind the wood that was not wood I felt energy crackle, and a throbbing one-two pulse against my fingers like the beating of a double heart. I touched music then. I found first a simple, clear melody, like a child's tune played on a recorder; but beneath it was the counterpoint, a swell of instruments that embellished the song into a vast and terrifyingly complex symphony. I tried to follow it, but my hands went numb.

Abandoning rationality and decorum (not to mention hygiene), I put my mouth to the box. It tasted right - I don't mean that it tasted like I thought it would, I mean it tasted right. It tasted of important things, good things: the savour of justice and the spice of freedom and the sweetness of hope. (It might also have tasted like wood and paint, but I didn't notice that at the time.) And it tasted like love, deep and passionate as red wine - though, I hasten to add, of a completely unromantic sort; so unromantic, in fact, that I ought to have recognised right away how stupid I was about to be, and stopped myself before it happened.

However, you know what they say about hindsight.

I was still standing there, my head awhirl with sensations and impressions beyond anything I'd ever experienced before, when a hundred brilliant, tiny hummingbirds of sound flew past me, and I realised that the door was opening. I staggered back, tripped over my own left foot, and fell to my hands and knees. When I looked up a man was standing there, regarding me with mild curiosity.

He was tall, and seemed to be mostly knees and elbows. His clothing was woolly and several shades of drab, and looked as though he had slept in it; even his canvas hat was slightly rumpled. His hair, thick and straight and inexpertly cut short, had once been dark but was now tabby-grey. He had a long face with strong cheekbones and a very sharp nose, and his mouth seemed about half an inch too wide. The eyes that met mine were half-lidded, but there was no lethargy in that glittering, unblinking gaze.

Indigo.

I stared at him for a moment, completely at a loss for words. If he'd been able to read my mind, he would have known it was better to leave me that way, but he couldn't, and he didn't. He extended a hand to help me up from the floor, and said pleasantly, 'Synaesthesia's a headache, isn't it? Hello, by the way. I'm the Doctor.'

In my own defence, I have to say that I was out of practice when it came to introductions, or, for that matter, conversations. Plus, I hadn't slept very well the night before, and I still had the remnants of an anti-depressant buzzing around my system. Coupled with the sensory experience I'd just had, it was a blue-ribbon recipe for disaster. But I think I still might have been able to keep it to myself, if he hadn't put a name to the peculiar gift I'd been trying to come to terms with all my life.

His understanding, however, was too much. I took his hand, rose unsteadily to my feet, and blurted, 'I love you.'

Anyone else would have jumped, or laughed, or slammed the door in my face. He only blinked. Then he gave a little shrug and folded himself back into the box, indicating with an economical but not unfriendly gesture that I should follow.

I didn't stop to think about how weird it was. I just opened the door wide and walked in. When I saw the Console Room, I sat down in the middle of the floor and laughed until I cried.

The Doctor came out of a door at the back of the room and said, somewhat reproachfully, 'There's a sofa.'

Brushing the tears away with the back of my hand, I gave him the first honest answer I'd given anyone in years: 'I know, but it's singing, and I don't want to disturb it.'

I looked around the brightly lit room, taking in the walls patterned with milky roundels and the octagonal island with its cavalcade of switches and buttons, and added, 'Actually, it all sounds lovely.'

'Thank you.' He looked genuinely pleased, his mobile features completely free of either the confusion or the pity I'd come to expect. I wanted very badly to fling myself into his arms and hug him until neither of us could breathe, but somehow I held myself still. 'Well,' he said, 'when the song's over, let me know and we'll have tea.'

'It's stopped.' I got up from the floor.

'Right.' He winked at me and slipped out of the room. I sat on the sofa and thought determinedly about nothing until he came back, bearing a tray which held a plate of digestive biscuits, a teapot, milk and sugar, and two china cups.

'Just milk, please,' I said.

'Good girl.' He poured me a cup.

Gingerly I took it, sipped the creamy liquid, and made a face.

'Is it too brown?' inquired the Doctor anxiously.

'It's not your fault. My senses seem to be annoyed with me at the moment. I'll wait a minute or two and it'll be fine.' I put the cup down on the round table by my elbow. 'By the way, will you say that again, please?'

The Doctor, whatever else he might be, was no fool. 'I said synaesthesia's a headache. Especially when it's chronic. Tell me, does the 'a' of the English alphabet really have the tint of weathered wood?'

'Who told you that?'

'Good old Vladimir Nabokov. He seems to have fancied himself a synaesthete.'

'A,[1] I said experimentally, and something small, black and shiny fell out of my lips and cracked against the floor.

'No,' said the Doctor, 'that was the French 'a'. Are you bilingual?'

'My parents put me in immersion. Do you mean to say that you actually saw that?'

'I didn't see anything. Did it look like polished ebony?'

'Actually, yes.' I sat back on the sofa and took a mouthful of my drink, which had mercifully stopped tasting brown and gone back to being tea. I took another sip, enjoying the fragrant, faintly exotic flavour. 'Is this Earl Grey?'

'I don't know; I never label anything.' He raised his own cup to his lips, tasted it. 'Urn, yes, it is. Can you control it?'

I shook my head. 'Given time, I might have learned, I don't know. But they started giving me drugs when I got here, and it's just been getting worse.' I had barely finished the sentence when something cold and flat slapped against my arm. I let out a strangled exclamation and grabbed at the thing, but the Doctor had already whisked it away.

And suddenly my head was completely clear. The brisk humming of the antidepressant, the hypnotic croon of the sedatives, stopped in an instant. I sat motionless, my mouth open, awed by the beauty of the silence.

'Who was giving you drugs and why?' asked the Doctor.

'Don't you know where you are?'

'Roughly, yes. Specifically, no.' He looked embarrassed and a little sheepish, like a schoolboy whose papier-mache volcano has failed to erupt on cue. 'Sometimes the TARDIS has a mind of its own.'

'You're in an asylum. I'm one of the patients.' Well, it had to be said sometime.

'Really?' I expected him to be horrified, but he merely looked interested. 'Because of the synaesthesia?'

'Sort of. They think I went crazy and murdered my little brother.'

'So what did happen?' There was no hesitation in the question, no doubt, no suspicion. I felt joy rising in me like a helium balloon, and I wanted to fling my arms around his neck and kiss him until his teeth hurt, but I reminded myself that I had already made enough of an idiot of myself for one day.

'He was eaten by a mushroom,' I said.

'Where?'

'In the woods behind St. Andrew's school.' I took a deep breath, preparing myself for the recitation of the story nobody ever believed. 'We were digging around the foot of a big maple tree, because David had found some strange fungus, and he wanted to take it home and look it up in his guide. He'd hardly touched the thing when it started glowing, and getting bigger, and I told him to get away from it in case it burst and got into his eyes or something, but he couldn't seem to let go and -' I closed my eyes, swallowing hard. 'It just folded around him. I tried to help him, but I was afraid to touch it in case it ate me too, and throwing rocks at it didn't seem to make a difference. So I ran to get help, but when I got into the house my parents were downstairs watching ' *Yellow Submarine'* -'

'And you took one look at it and went into a synaestheizure.' He paused, considering what he'd said, and gave a wry smile. 'Sorry. Habit of a previous incarnation.'

'It didn't exactly help my credibility.'

'So...' The Doctor folded himself into a cross-legged position, frowning briefly at a hole in one grey sock. 'When they went back to the place where you'd left David, the mushroom was gone.'

I nodded. 'And so was he.'

There was a moment of silence. Then the Doctor said, very kindly, 'Would you like to cry now?'

I couldn't look at him. 'I don't know.'

'I think it's probably time you did.'

Grief grabbed my throat then, squeezed with both hands, and I could barely choke out my reply: 'Will you hold me if I do?'

The Doctor regarded me seriously a moment. Then he opened his arms, and I fell into them and sobbed until I could no longer taste the sound of my tears.

'I've missed the time,' said the Doctor, making a face at something he saw on the console. Tm out by a century at least.'

I sat on the sofa, cupping the dregs of my tea in both hands, my eyes still itching but mercifully dry. 'What are you looking for?'

'Something Adric might have left behind.'

'Ad rie?'

'A companion of mine. A boy, from Alzarius. He won a badge for mathematical excellence.' He turned to me, and I saw lines on his face I hadn't noticed before. 'He was on a ship that crashed here. Sort of.'

'What kind of ship?'

'It belonged to some Cybermen. Nasty creatures, terribly selfish and impolite. Count yourself fortunate if you never meet them.'

'Wait a second. You're saying an alien ship -'

'Part of an alien ship.'

'- crash-landed in the Sudbury Basin, and nobody noticed?'

'There wasn't anybody around then to notice.'

I opened my mouth to say something, closed it, opened it again and said something else 'The crash made the Sudbury Basin.'

'Exactly.' He eyed me with a new respect. 'What else were you going to ask?'

'Did they keep pets?'

'It would seem so. Sporani are vicious little beasts, not very bright, but extremely hardy - and long-lived, as your brother unfortunately discovered. I imagine it had lain in a semi-dormant state for millennia, feeding on the occasional forest creature, until you and David woke it up.'

Then it's still there.' I sat up suddenly. 'And it's going to go on killing. Doctor, we have to destroy it.'

'I don't think that'll be necessary.' His voice was gentle. 'One odd thing about Sporani - they're allergic to humans. It annoyed the Cybermen terribly when they found out.'

'So that's why I couldn't find it again,' I said flatly.

'Shrivelled up and blown away, I expect. Their digestive systems work alarmingly fast, so it couldn't possibly spit your brother out even once the reaction began, but -'

'Are there likely to be any more?'

'No.'

I said grimly, 'There had better not be.'

'I already scanned for them. There weren't any others, or if there were, they died a long time ago.' The Doctor took off his hat, adjusted the band thoughtfully, and put it back on again. 'Well, that's that for the present - your present, at least.'

The words buzzed through the air and bit at me like mosquitoes, sucking away my hope. Miserably I swatted them away and rose to leave.

'Where are you going?' asked the Doctor curiously.

I spoke in a whisper. 'Back.'

'Whatever for?'

'What choice do I have?'

'Well, I'd rather assumed you'd be coming with me.'

I whirled, staring at him. 'You mean that I can?'

'Of course. All positions vacant at the moment, and besides, you never know when a synaesthete's going to come in handy.'

Fear melted into a creamy sweetness in my mouth. The sofa started singing again, in a glorious throbbing contralto, and laughter tumbled like baby squirrels from my lips and scampered about the floor. I thrust out a hand for him to shake.

'Doctor,' I said, 'I would be honored.'

He beamed at me. 'Splendid.' Then a little frown formed between his brows and he said, 'Won't you tell me your name?'

If I had suspected, for one instant, that he had ever listened to the Doors, I would have been furious. As it was, I had to take the question at face value.

'Aletheia,' I said. I didn't offer him my last name, and he didn't ask for it.

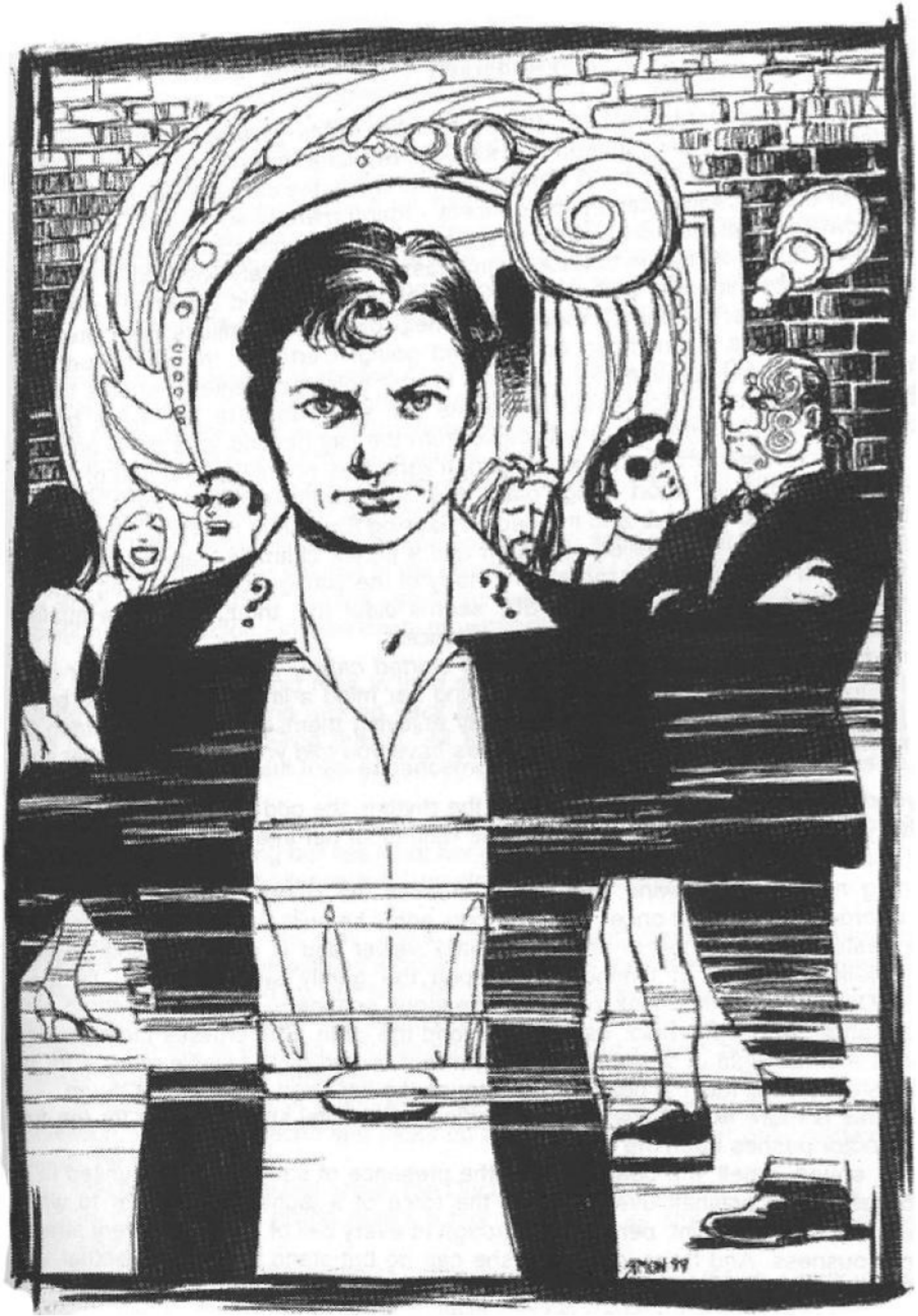
'Does it get any shorter in a crisis?'

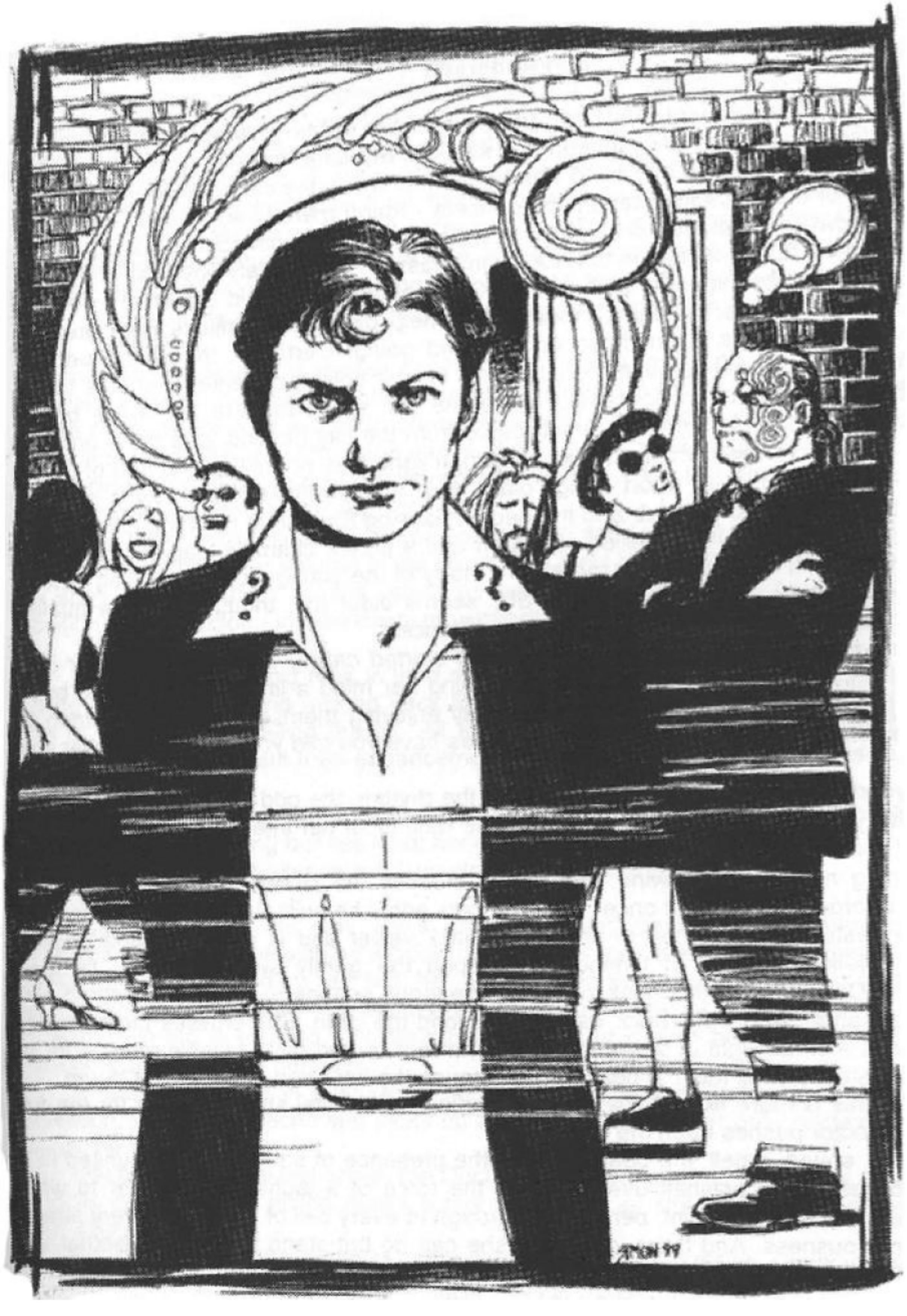
'Ali. No,' I corrected hastily, remembering my mother, 'Make thatThea. Please.'

'Thea, sit down and have another biscuit.' He smiled at me, and his eyes crinkled in a way that made the tea in my stomach fizz like champagne. If only he knew - no, he did know - make that, if only he cared. Right. Sure. In your dreams, girl.

'After all,' continued the Doctor, cheerful and oblivious, 'it's a hundred years until dinnertime.'

So I sat down, and ate, while the horse coughed into the megaphone and the Doctor hummed Bach. And when the librarian burst into the storage room (or so I imagine it), we were gone, leaving nothing behind but the fading scent of indigo.





Grey
By
Jon Andersen

'Club Feel' reads the wrought iron logo, backlit by neon lights glowing a bruised violet against the darkened brick work. Beneath the sign are two large wooden doors, iron shod and stained to match the rest of the old warehouse into which the club has been installed. On either side of this entrance stand two bouncers - maori men, hired for their imposing size and intimidating facial tattoos - clothed in stylish black suits with scarlet leather vests. Their radio headsets connect them to back-up in a fashion deliberately obvious.

Specially installed lights brightly illuminate the streets of the old industrial estate in which Club Feel resides, a security measure to help dissuade criminals from preying under cover of darkness upon those coming and going. Certainly, the young people arriving on foot or by vehicle have thoughts only for the delectable entertainments to be found behind those wooden doors. But there are still shadows here, for those bright halogen pools grace only the most direct routes from the city beyond, and there are still those niches and crannies where that warm golden light does not fall. It is in one of these places that a woman with short indigo-black hair and cornflower blue eyes stands, watching the entrance to the club and the people passing through it. Sporting black jeans and suede sneakers, a wide lapelled gold shirt and a purple chamois leather frock coat, she stands apart in wearing rather more than many of the young women passing before her, and even some of the young men. She seems older too, though this is a quality conveyed more through her eyes than her appearance.

You used to love these things before you started calling yourself the Doctor and saving the universe, she thinks to herself, opening her mind a little to the psychic buzz emanating from the club and the people already enjoying themselves within. *Getting In touch with who you used to be... How many times have you told yourself this is what you need?*

Beyond the immediate call of the music, the rhythm, the odd unity, ahead, she can feel, as always, the subtle caress of the universe waiting for her attention.

When will you get another chance?

Casting her lot to the wind, the Doctor crosses the street, determined to enjoy herself and forget herself all at once. The bouncers admit her without a second glance.

The vestibule is swathed in shimmery black velvet and lit with ultra-violet lights, creating a delicate patina of luminescence upon the gently swaying fabric. Despite herself, the Doctor spots the sleek panels of weapons scanners, discreetly located just past the entrance, where the brick vanishes beyond the cloth. She crosses the chamber and ascends a small flight of stone stairs; the music is muted by the single metal door at the top, but she can still feel the beat vibrate through the floor and make the air thrum.

'Now this is more like it,[1] she grins. Dropping her mental shields a little for the full effect, the Doctor pushes open the door.

Music, sound, smell, the beat, strobes, the presence of so many minds united in a hedonistic gestalt... It washes over her with the force of a tsunami, filling her to what almost feels like bursting point, percolating through to every cell of her body, every strand of her consciousness. And there is nothing she can do but stand there and weather the onslaught.

It's been a long time since she's felt this alive.

Only when, some uncertain time after that orgasmic rush, someone attempts to come through the door behind her does the Doctor move again, stepping to one side. Already she feels herself swaying to the beat - an involuntary bouncing of the head, a slight twisting of the shoulders - as she takes a calmer look around the club.

Rubber matting, so deep a shade of purple as to be almost black, completely covers the prefabricated mezzanine level travelling the walls of the building, a level specifically built a metre or so above the flagstones to turn the massive open space of the factory floor into a pit. Emerging from this pit are the sounds of sex - the interrupted pantings and groans and orgasmic cries, the movement of flesh against flesh. Primal sounds, coupled to techno-tribal music with an industrial beat; this is what the young people of the city dance to, pressed close together beneath the flickering strobes and randomly tracking spotlights, high on their drugs and their music and each other. Wrought iron stairs twist lazily upwards from each corner of the mezzanine, leading to the bar floor above. It overhangs the mezzanine a little, allowing people to peer over the railings at the dancers through the delicate seeming net stretched across the open space.

Closing her eyes, letting the music lead her, she descends.

Nothing but the vaguest of shapes can be determined above the scaffolding to which the complex array of the club's lights are attached. Located in the roof directly above the centre of the dance floor is a glass dome, shallow but with a diameter a little over half the width of the club. So, even from the dance floor, it's still possible to see the sky, and thus the massive storm-front that has gathered over the city in the last few hours.

No one's looking at the sky just now.

The bullet ricocheting off the wall and burying itself in the frame of the skylight can't be heard over the sheer volume of the music. But the Doctor can see the men who made the shot, can see them coming down the service gantry towards her, the promise of violation - her violation - in their every movement.

She keeps running.

Two more of the big men in their dark suits appear at the far end of the walkway, pulling out their guns and racking back the slides in a single synchronous movement in time to the bass beat filling the air. All five of them close in on her, knowing she has nowhere to run, confident their enhancements can take her down if she tries to fight her way past them.

'I don't suppose we can talk about this?' she asks with rhetorical sweetness, a whimsical smile brushing her lips if not her eyes.

Their stony faced silence is all too eloquent an answer.

'Didn't think so.'

She turns back the way she's just come, and pauses in the manner of one transfixed. Framed in the sloping window of the club's overhead office is a lone figure with copper hair and an elegant red suit, her eyes hidden behind gold mirrored glasses and her expression unreadable. But there's no mistaking the sense of sharply honed malice the woman in red is exuding, nor the bizarre feeling of kinship between herself and this stranger that clutches at her soul.

A sudden change in posture signals that perhaps the Doctor's not alone in this realisation; the psychic echo she picks up of the order to kill her only confirms it. It also signals the time to leave.

Flashing her cheekiest smile, the Doctor vaults the handrail and drops towards the oblivious crowd below, giving reality a tiny little push as she does so. Just enough to make it blink.

For the briefest of moments, every light in the entire building simultaneously cuts out, but no one apart from the Doctor's pursuers notice anything out of the ordinary. There is no body on the ground or the netting above the dancers, no anomalous movement. To all intents and purposes, it is as if she has never been here.

The brick wall the Doctor presses herself back against feels deliciously cool against the palms of her hands, as does the predawn breeze that caresses her softly through her clothes. Even though she hears the loud thump of her heart over anything else, she can still just make out the music of the club from which she's escaped.

That was a bit too close,' she mutters, taking a deep breath and centring herself, thoughts and body alike. Once she can no longer feel her heart pounding in panic, she counts to five then peeks around the corner.

Despite the hour, despite the first splattering announcements of the storm overhead starting to break, there are still a few people entering the club. The bouncers - different men than from when she went in, but still maori warriors - converse with each other and occasionally the clubbers passing them. There is no other sign of activity, no indication of further pursuit.

'One thing to be grateful for, I guess,' she mutters dourly.

Pulling her head back around the corner, she closes her eyes and sends out little feelers of mental energy, tasting the thoughts and emotions of the world about her. The clubbers make up a large portion of what she perceives, their sheer volume almost overwhelming and dangerously tempting in equal parts. With an effort, she moves on, surfing the edge of that particular maelstrom until she sights the mental island she seeks.

A brooding cloud of malevolence shrouds the thoughts within, though they are illuminated occasionally by flashes of anger. Thin unidirectional tendrils stretch outwards from this seething morass, connecting it to the simpler and more open minds of its lackeys. The presence of the psi-web makes the Doctor frown, bringing as it does the unpleasant possibility that the discovery of her intrusion hadn't been bad timing alone.

On the bright side at least, her psychic presence hasn't been noticed - though given that strange sense of familiarity it could equally well be a ruse. *Small mercies,* Doctor. *Small mercies.*

She retreats, reeling in her perceptions until she is once more alone in the side- street. Another quick glance around the corner shows a continued lack of pursuit; the only movement is a group of four people getting into a taxi and driving off. Doubtlessly, the lack of her immediate capture is going to make the woman and her lackeys concentrate on preparing for what is to come.

'Why'd I have to choose *here* to unwind?' she mutters to herself a touch bitterly. 'Haven't I earned myself a small break from my life?' She isn't surprised when an answer fails to supply itself. Heaving a disgusted sigh directed at life in general and hers in particular, she moves off.

The warehouse is by the quayside, in the part of the docks no one comes to much any more, even to commit crimes. It is a base creature of stained brick, rusting steel, dirty glass streaked by even dirtier rain. Three levels of open air and plywood crates between the zigzag roof and the cement are sealed off from the world behind a massive plate steel door that has streamers of torn 'Police-line' tape fluttering fitfully on either side of it. Black rain, the wind changing the direction it falls seemingly at random, sleets down from the leaden grey clouds hiding the sun, scouring away the chalk outlines marked upon the cracked and greying asphalt.

Lightning sears the sky.

Somewhere close, something inhuman screams in mortal pain.

A jetty reaches out into the bay, looking very much like a skeletal finger. It's long enough that ocean-going vessels can moor themselves to it and still have room to spare, and wide enough for the freight carriage that trundles upon the twin tracks running down the pier's centre to carry a car lengthways and leave room for a person to walk either side of it. It has a sullen air of disuse about it now. It is a sense that comes from the far end of it, where the structure terminates abruptly, pitted and twisted and bent as if it had been gnawed off by something very big and very hungry.

There are reasons why no one comes here much any more. All of them are bad.

Visibility drops to only a few metres as the storm sets in, the sheer volume of the downpour making it almost as hard to see as though there were fog enshrouding the city instead of this rain. The sounds of foghorns and warning bells carry forlornly
across the bay, joined by the low growling of engines as the occasional vessel passes within ear shot of this place.

Gulls float miserably upon the water, sometimes being slapped into each other by the violence of the tide, and squawking in protest; they don't like this place either, but the feeding is too good to make them stay away long.

It is this depressing vista that greets the off-white van that slows to a stop outside the warehouse. Despite the dents and scratches it sports, it just looks too clean to belong here

The headlights fade and the engine rumbles into silence, leaving the wipers stuck halfway. For a moment, the van just squats there, its windows fogged. Then the doors are flung open and ten figures emerge, becoming wet to the skin almost immediately. The sight of people in full military dress uniform - sky blue berets sagging ineffectually - standing here in the rain seems slightly surreal.

Once more lightning illuminates the night. This time there is thunder.

Faces grim, the soldiers walk out onto the jetty, clustered together without any sort of formation; if the weather bothers them, they give no sign. None of them look to be armed, but each carries something decidedly unsoldierly - or very soldierly indeed, depending on one's opinion. They come to a halt at the ruined end of the pier, and look down as one into the blackness of the bay.

'We come here to commemorate a dear friend,' the one at the very front of the group, a colonel, says. Water drips from his neatly trimmed blonde beard, while his incredibly blue eyes might have been crying, but there is no way to tell. 'May she rest in peace. Wherever she has gone.' A pause, head bowed, then he tosses a red rose onto the water, turns and walks away.

The others follow his lead, throwing their roses to join his, trailing respectfully behind him.

The Doctor is inside the van, waiting.

'I hate this place,' she says softly, arms wrapped about herself tightly, her Irish lilt surfing a hidden tide of emotion running so very deep. There is something chilling behind her eyes, something to make nightmares scream. Too much of my life dies here.'

As one, the soldiers look to their commanding officer. Something beyond the Doctor's mere mood makes them strangely uneasy around her this bleak morn, but she doesn't pry. The psychic residue of all that has happened here, of what she has done and lost here, is enough to force her mental shields up to such a degree that prying is impossible.

'Doctor...' The colonel reaches out to touch her, such an intimate familiarity in his movements that it hurts. 'We just...'

'...Were grieving for one of your own, Nathan,' she nods, taking his hand in hers for a heartbeat. 'I heard.' She trembles slightly, glancing at the expressions of the soldiers behind him. 'I might even know. But you'd better get your people inside before they catch their deaths. There's trouble somewhere else that we need to deal with.'

'There always is,' Nathan answers philosophically, getting in.

'Oh, there's also five dead bodies in that warehouse,' she adds, refusing to look where she indicates, troubled by the deeds of a madman, and what she had done because of them.

I hate this place, she thinks again dismally. *I can feel it becoming a nexus in my life.*

Nathan shrugs, accepting her words the way one accepts the world is round, the way he always has. The rest of the soldiers follow, quashing their disquiet. A mutual display of an absolute loyalty she so intimately understands, yet is sometimes so terrified by.

'So, what are we up against this time?' he asks, wringing his beret dry as best he can. His voice holds a certain blithe humour that someone who doesn't know him might find out of place. But she knows him, knows it's how he copes with what gets thrown at him and his people.

'Necromancy,' she answers simply, shivering again as the van starts up and drives off.

Shivering not because of the cold, but because of who she doesn't want to believe is watching them depart.

'Zombies?' someone who sounds young asks her. She doesn't see their face.

'Grrrr. Argh,' someone else says, a joke several of the soldiers share and the Doctor completely misses.

'Nothing so mundane,' she shakes her head regretfully. 'They're stealing souls.'

Regardless of where they might be found, there is a certain uniformity belonging to briefing rooms. They all have chairs and tables and devices for conveying information in all its rich variety; the actual form of these facilities may vary depending on time and place, but their function remains the same. But beyond that, these places are rarely used for good things, happy things. People are told bad things here, told about crimes and the need to stop and punish them, or perhaps even to commit them in the name of an ideological supremacy.

Good things may happen because of what is done in places like these, but events never start with them.

This particular room is in a darkness

alleviated only by the wintry light seeping in through half-curtained windows looking out towards the heart of the city. There are chairs haphazardly arranged in the back half of the room, dormant computer terminals and projection screens at the front. The only particularly notable sounds are the quiet hum of the air conditioning and the constant susurration of rain against double-glazed glass.

Nestled in a back corner, arms loosely wrapped around herself for lack of anything else to do with them, the Doctor stares past her dual reflection at the headlights of the cars moving slowly fourteen floors below. It's a vista that reminds her of the photographs she loved as a child, the time-delayed ones that would create rivers of red and white liquid light

Despite the cold and the wet waiting for them outside, despite what they are about to face, she feels an odd sense of calm. The sound of rain, of flowing water, has always been something that comforts her. From curling up with her Technicolor golliwog as a young girl before the hearth on a winter's night while her Da told the family stories, to the innocent sensuality of washing hair, to losing her virginity in a beach house during the summer rain, it's a sound she associates with positive things.

Good things.

It's something she hopes will never change.

The sound of a turning handle impinges on her reverie. She turns as Nathan half steps into to room, her soft 'No' staying his hand before the shadows can be dispelled. Accepting her again without question, he closes the door and comes to stands next to her, smelling of gun oil and Old Spice beneath his combat fatigues.

'It's been a while, hasn't it Nathan?'

'Three years,' he agrees, an echo of regret in his voice. 'Two, if you count that business with the Bunyip.'

She nods, taking the chance to observe how the years have changed her friend's face. 'Almost always because of calamity.'

His turn to nod now. 'I've just given Sol a call about those bodies.'

Once more, he doesn't ask, trusting in her. She wonders if it's a special privilege he extends only to her.

'How is he?' she asks, counting a few more crowsfeet about his eyes, a tiny crescent-shaped scar beneath his left ear. 'I haven't met him since I became the Doctor.'

'You know Solomon,' he smiles back. 'Not happy unless he's picking away at something or another, getting under people's skins.'

Again she nods, and he lapses into a companionable silence that lasts until she breaks it. There are far too few people in her life now that she can talk to with any intimacy, and the man next to her is without doubt one of them.

'It was something... personal... with the Master.' Her voice is tight, her Irish lilt so very strong as it always is in times of extreme emotion. 'It was a little while ago for me now, for you not even half an hour before that... that ceremony.' A drawn out sigh. 'It was... ugly.'

'I didn't think it was you,' he says softly, shifting slightly, his shoulder touching hers. 'Killing has never been your style.'

'But it could be!' she protests, walking away from the window, her tone vehement despite the fact she too speaks softly. 'I've had to close parts of myself off, open up new ones, to do what I do as the Doctor. And it scares me sometimes, Nathan, having this sort of power and nothing but my own sense of right and wrong to stop me abusing it.'

She slaps the light-switch irritably, and there is a sudden brief hum of starters followed by the staccato flicker of harsh white fluorescent tubes that quickly becomes an ambience. The rain-filled noon visible through the room's windows becomes slightly darker.

'You're facing the dilemma, the nightmare, of every good soldier,' he answers, turning to look at her. 'At what point do fighting the good fight, doing the right thing, and obeying orders diverge from one another? Does the 'greater good' justify torture or execution?' He shrugs, his eyes holding her with the same intensity she remembers from the very first time she and he met.

'Does it?' the Doctor challenges.

'I think we both know the answer,' he says, moving to join her. 'It's the paradox of what we do. We're soldiers, sworn to live and die on the behalf of a cause we believe is right. We both have access to terrible things, and it's only our ethics - and perhaps the knowledge that there are higher powers that can squish us like bugs - that stops us from abusing them. There are no absolute safeguards in life.'

He smiles fondly, the touch of his hand upon hers as he whispers her true name feeling deliciously good, the warmth of those callused fingers intertwining with her own too brief. 'You've given me the honour to know you better and more completely than anyone else in my life, perhaps even including myself. I've seen you handle what you've become, and I don't think you'll fail.'

'Optimist,' she grins, stepping away and feeling considerably more buoyant than she had been.

'Oh, it's an occupational hazard,' Nathan answers deadpan before checking his watch. 'Well, they'll b -'

The door is swung open, interrupting him.

'Melbourne is such a hole,' a man with the trace of an Italian accent remarks as he enters the room. Pulling off his wet trenchcoat to reveal a tailored blue suit and patent leather boots, he flings it over the back of the nearest chair. Looking over the wrong shoulder at whomever is following him, he doesn't bother checking the room for any other occupants.

'It's such a wet hole,' the woman following him agrees sullenly, her unusually deep voice carrying a note of conviction. Pulling off the rainbow coloured beanie covering her short green hair, she stuffs it in the pocket of her own rain-spattered trenchcoat, which she keeps tightly furled over her rather grungier seeming apparel. 'Stone should've left it to the damn Tanar'ii, inste -'

The man, finally noticing they are not alone, kicks his companion in the ankle as he waves in greeting. 'Hello, Colonel Stone.' There is something in his pale hazel eyes that she recognises, a certain commonality of awareness and experience with the structure of the universe.

'Colonel,' the young woman chimes in, tugging on the man's shoulder-length hair in casual reprisal for the kick, before turning her eyes on the Doctor. The true colour of her eyes is obscured behind customised contact lenses that make her irises appear to be circuit boards, but the Doctor suspects they're green.

'Nice of you to come,' Nathan smiles a little thinly, a subtle change in demeanour brought on by the presence of the new arrivals. 'Doctor, this is Drinnian Falcone and Max Schreck,' he points to the man and the woman in turn. 'Given their particular fields of expertise, they're our Broadsword specialists best suited to the current crisis.'

'Well, since that mess last month in

Katherine, we're the only people left in the Broadsword team,' Max adds cynically.

'Quite,' Nathan answers curtly as his soldiers begin to trickle into the room, forcing the four of them to move away from the door.

'So, you're the Doctor?' Drinnian asks, flicking a glance at Nathan before shaking her hand effusively. 'Just how many of you are there?'

'Enough,' she replies, the unease she had felt at the bay returning now in some part with his words, with the way he stresses her uniqueness.

'If you'd care to sit down, we'll be starting shortly,' interjects Nathan, placing a hand on the Doctor's shoulder and quite probably glaring at Falcone over it to judge by the edginess his thoughts project.

On her way to the front of the room, she catches sight of a reflection upon one of the windows of Max slapping Drinnian on the back of the head in apparent reprimand. The way her brother and his friends used to behave if one of them was about to blurt something out they shouldn't...

Something clicks into place.

'Was that my memorial this morning?' the Doctor asks in a whisper.

The question causes her friend to halt mid stride. 'You know the rule where you're concerned,' he whispers back, turning to look at her. 'We can't tell you about your fut -'

'That doesn't count now!' she snaps, almost loud enough to be heard by the nearest soldier. 'I've told you what's going to happen, and if we don't stop it, my knowing might be the only thing that saves us.'

Sighing, Nathan continues walking. It's a deep sigh, a powerful one that comes all the way from his toes. 'No, it wasn't you,' he says finally.

But what he says next wipes the nascent smile of relief off her face.

'It was one of the ones who'll follow after you.'

Even to the Doctor, the city seems overly grey and bleak, obscured as it is beneath the glowering pall of a storm that shows no inclination to abate.

Below and to the left, she can make out the helicopter Nathan is in almost solely by its running lights, so heavy is the downpour. Not that she has much opportunity to appreciate this vista, given the almost constant need to brace herself against the turbulence the helicopter is being subjected to, and the condition it's leaving her stomach in

It would be so simple to use her abilities, to push the fabric of reality a little to take the nausea away. But she fears doing so may create a disturbance the woman in red may notice. Not that her strangely familiar opponent isn't going to be expecting them, but the little bit of the Doctor whose task it is to be optimistic hopes they won't be noticed until too late.

'How much longer?' she shouts to the pilot, just as the helicopter drops several metres and lurches to the left. Beside her, Max chokes back her lunch, fingers curled in a death-grip around her flight harness.

'A couple of minutes!' comes the response, accompanied by a much quieter 'I hope,' that he doubtless thinks nobody else can hear.

'Is it true all you Doctors are alien?' Drinnian asks loudly. Of the six passengers, he seems the least bothered by the flight.

She fixes him with a quizzical stare, only half listening. The rest of her thoughts are elsewhere. Elsewhen.

'That's what they say,' he continues a tad defensively. 'There are so many rumours and stories going around UNIT, it's hard to know the truth.'

'I believe that's the general idea,' Max snaps acidly, provoking a smile from the soldier next to her. 'One of these days, you're going to pry too far, Dee.'

'No such thing,' he shakes his head emphatically, in a way suggesting this isn't exactly a new topic of debate. 'Information wants to be free: isn't that what you say?'

'It's not only the benign that wants to be free,' the Doctor warns darkly as Max glowers at her colleague. 'And I'm speaking from experience. Some things are best left alone, even if only for the simple reason we're not ready for them.'

There is something in her tone that silences the young occultist, a weight of truth he cannot ignore. So he closes his eyes, and the Doctor telepathically hears him recalling some of his spells, preparing himself. Which is odd, because she isn't consciously reading his thoughts...

'Oh cr -' she begins, reaching for the release catch of her harness. The sound of something mechanical and unmistakably bad comes from overhead. It's followed almost instantly by five different alarms from the cockpit as the helicopter shudders violently and begins to plummet with the aerodynamic efficiency of a brick.

A wave of fear washes over the Doctor, and though belonging mostly to her fellow passengers, it expunges nebulous thoughts of the future with the cold shock of the present. She ignores the chaos around her, the stench of Max's vomit, the pilot's violent swearing as he desperately tries to pull up, a half dozen desperate invocations of belief, the realisation that Nathan's helicopter is in exactly the same situation as hers.

So many lives down to her. And little pushes aren't going to work.

Opening herself to the consequences, she gives reality a violent kick.

So reality blinks, then bitch-slaps her straight back.

There is no sign of life within the industrial estate that is the home of Club Feel. Sunday afternoon is normally a slow time in the life of most cities, and the torrential downpour is making it even less likely people will venture out of their homes for enjoyment.

Club Feel stands alone and isolated in the midst of the industrial estate that it calls home. The daylight, such as it is, robs the building of much of the mystique and allure lent by the night, leaving it little more than an old warehouse with a metal sign and fancy doors. The other buildings don't fare any better, run down and seemingly abandoned as most of them are, separated by old roads and wide expanses of cracked concrete in which patches of scraggly grass try to grow. A couple of these weary old structures have new locks and doors, their windows and roofs intact, but they are out numbered by those in some manner exposed to the wind and rain. As far as any building can do so, they look thoroughly miserable.

Lightning rips across the sky, for a split second bathing the city in a light brighter than the heart of an atomic explosion.

Reality blinks.

Obscuring the massive thunderclap is a tremendous exhalation of sound shattering every piece of glass within a one hundred metres of the estate.

Reality blinks.

In the near distance, alarms and sirens begin to sound in discordant symphony.

Reality blinks.

Metal screeches.

People yell.

Metal rends.

People scream.

Metal snaps.

People pray.

Like toys discarded by a petulant child, two helicopters tumble and slide across the asphalt and the concrete, leaving debris large and small in their wake until they collide together and fetch up with a reverberating crunch against the side of a warehouses on the far side of the estate, one upside down upon the other.

For several minutes, all is relatively still, bar the rain dancing upon the wreckage.

Some unseen action within the topmost helicopter causes the ruined craft to shudder and vibrate. A booted foot kicks out the shattered web of plexiglass covering the cockpit, and the windshield's descent is soon followed by that of a soldier with a shallow but bloody gash across her forehead. Picking herself up off the ground, her hands unsteadily holding her rifle, she glances about.

'Clear!'

In response to her call, the others begin to squirm their way out of the helicopter, spreading out in a loose perimeter, peering out into the rain-filled gloom with weapons raised. All of them are bruised and bloody in some fashion, but of the eight who finally emerge, none appear seriously hurt.

Nathan is the last to make it out, his movements a little laboured and favouring his left knee. 'Situation?' he snaps.

'No sign of hostiles, Sir,' another soldier answers, a sergeant with his right eye swollen shut. 'Lisi and Tranter are trying to crack the second bird. The club is about a hundred and fifty metres that way, best guess.' He points somewhere on the other side of the warehouse.

'Good man, Sergeant,' he nods as there is the sound of a rifle butt forcing entry into the second cockpit.

'Thank god!'

Falcone's effusive exclamation draws Nathan's attention. Dismissing his subordinate, he limps over to where the occultist has pulled himself upright with the help of the two corporals. His clothes are stained with blood and other, more unpleasant things.

'Colonel!' the younger man calls out the moment he sees Nathan. Though looking dazed, he seems more distressed than actually injured.

'We-'

'What's taking so fucking long?' Schreck's angrily panicked voice echoes out of the helicopter. 'We're losing her!'

Nathan's face turns ashen. Shoving Falcone aside, he lurches into the helicopter past the unconscious form of the pilot still strapped into his chair, crowding up behind Lisi before Tranter can follow the medic inside.

Lisi's torch reveals a huddle of people - Schreck and the two soldiers who had been travelling with her and the others. The Doctor lays supine upon the ground, head resting in Schreck's lap, gore-soaked shirt torn open to reveal the jagged shard of carbon-fibre rotor blade that has burst through the thin metal of the helicopter and erupted upwards through her abdomen. Breaths coming in short, ragged gasps, she stares at something unknown.

As Lisi bends down to see what she can do, Nathan turns around and yanks off the pilot's headset, flipping switches on the fitfully sparking control panel, his face grim. After a moment, he tosses the headset aside, having received not even a single burst of static. 'Sir, we need -' Lisi starts.

'I know!' he snaps back without bothering to look at her. 'Tranter, take Wong and Pridham and steal us something we can use for a medivac, and I don't care if you have to shoot people to do it.'

'Sir!' the young man salutes, looking like he wants to grin at the order, but finding something in his commander's eyes that makes it impossible to do so.

After Tranter runs off, Nathan looks back inside in time to see the rotor fragment being slid free with an obscene schluck of sound. It's replaced immediately with the hand of one of the soldiers as ichor seeps anew from the wound: an unavoidable necessity if they are to evacuate her to a hospital.

Muttering a prayer, he steps out into the rain where Falcone is waiting for him in the lee of the other helicopter. 'Colonel Stone, what are we going to do? We can't face these people now, not lik -'

'Shut up,' he growls, grabbing the occultist's shoulder. 'You're our resident sorcerer, and it's time to earn your pay packet.'

'I told you and the Doctor at the briefing that I don't have the knowledge or the power to stop someone as powerful as this woman is meant to be on my own!' Falcone protests. 'I don't know how long what wards that I can throw up will work.'

'F... Drinnian,' sighs Nathan irritably. 'She took the bullet for us, so you're *all we have!* Besides, I -'

'Shit!' Schreck's curse floats out towards the two men. 'I've lost her pulse!'

A brief awareness of chaos, of smell and fear and pain, then darkness again. Only the darkness isn't empty. And it isn't dark.

It's grey.

The dark haired woman sitting upon that broken-edged jetty looks up momentarily, then returns her attention to the long stemmed rose cradled in her slender, long fingered hands. Those fingers trace the curve of every petal, the contour of every thorn, feeling texture and shape. Lifting it to her nose she inhales, tastes it delicately with her tongue. Green eyes remember every detail.

'Rose,' she says softly, returning it to the water she had snatched it from. The woman watches it swirl and dance until it is lost to her. 'Was it for me?'

There is no answer, except the wind

attempting to tug at the lace and satins and velvets and stretch knits that clothe her in rich midnight shades. Getting to her booted feet, the woman ambles down the jetty with silent foot falls, a wistful look on her oriental features. She is, despite the violent weather, perfectly dry.

As is the Doctor, who stands at the foot of the jetty watching her.

The two of them are the only patches of colour in the otherwise monochrome world.

'I *really* hate this place,' the Doctor mutters dourly, glancing first at the warehouse then at her ruined clothes, before returning her attention to the other woman approaching her. An attempt to probe the woman's mind brings an awareness that her psychic talent is generating nothing but the mental equivalent of white noise.

With a philosophical shrug, she closes her eyes, centres herself, and waits.

'Hello,' the woman says when she is a few short steps away, a timid smile on her lips.

'Hi,' the Doctor replies, feeling unusually awkward in a way she hasn't been since she was a teenager. Something about the woman stirs echoes in her soul; the same sort of echoes as the woman in red, but of a different essence. It is a disturbing confirmation of her fears.

'Are you new here?' the other asks, brow furrowing. 'I don't remember ever seeing you before, but there's something familiar...'

There should be considering you match Nathan's picture of the woman who died here, she thinks, but a small shake of the head is all that she responds with. 'I've been dead before, but never here. Physically, anyway.

'I'm called the Doctor.'

'I'm... I don't remember what I'm called.' The woman sighs and looks out over the bay, intensely frustrated. 'Sometimes I know - there's a beautiful voice that tells me. But it always goes away, and I forget who I was, until the voice comes back to me again. Forget, the way I've forgotten almost everything else.'

The Doctor nods in that way people do when they don't have anything particular to say

'I think I'd fade away entirely if it wasn't for that voice.'

'I know what that's like, sometimes,' she agrees, placing a hand on the other's shoulder. It feels cold but real, like her own expectations of what is to come. 'Are you waiting for the voice?'

'Yes,' comes the answer, a single world devoid of the forlorn undertones that have characterised her words until now. Then she tenses, looking towards the buildings behind them.

The Doctor doesn't hear the horses until the beasts are almost upon the pair, so indistinguishable is the sound of their movement amidst the violence of the rain. There are two of them, harnessed side by side, with dead black coats and rugged tails and manes. An intelligence lurks behind their eyes, one that resents the weather they have been forced out into.

She sniffs, noticing the scent of smoke mingling with that of wet horse, steam coming off their gaunt bodies.

The coach they pull is unusual, a combination of wrought iron, smoked glass and highly polished black wood. It rests between four large wheels, and is constructed with strange angles that don't sit easily at the back of the mind; it's the sort of thing to raise hackles and invoke ancient wards.

A movement draws her attention to the driver, an anonymous figure dressed in the attire of a mortician, from top hat to tails. The oilskin, the scarf and the leather gloves beneath which the driver lurks disguises anything by which gender may be determined.

A shiver licks the Doctor's spine. That the carriage and the steeds drawing it are affected by the weather while the two women aren't is something she finds disquieting.

'What is it?' she asks, tilting her head towards the grim and overly gothic apparition.

'It always comes when I forget,' the other woman answers. 'For as long as I can remember about forgetting, any way. The voice tells me it... it is my representation of... something. But the voice *made* me remember that I should never get in.'

'Really?' she asks over her shoulder, talking a step closer. One of the horses whickers, showing unusual teeth.

Her perception of the world is over-riding mine, the realisation flashes through the Doctor's mind. How powerful would she be with her sense of self restored? How powerful am I going to become?

'It will take me where the voice can't go. You too.'

'Hmmmmm,' she muses before turning her attention to the driver and grinning brightly.

'Hello there. You look lost.'

The driver's head turns to face her. Or at least she assumes it does, because the clothing shifts in the appropriate direction.

'Can I help you?' She pauses, considers something. 'Urn, you can see me, can't you, as well as hear me?^{1} Another pause, then a voice a little less deliberately blithe. 'Urn, hello?'

A long hand silently emerges and indicates the coach. Or more accurately, the door now sitting temptingly ajar that was closed the last time she looked.

Expression brightening again, the Doctor reaches out and pushes the door closed, the lock catching with a brittle metallic click. 'There you go.'

It's very hard for an entity that fails to present a face to give the impression that it is staring in a dumbfounded manner; the driver manages it. Once again the door opens, and there is no mistaking the deliberateness of the act.

Raising an eyebrow, she glances over her shoulder at the other woman, who is watching this in slightly puzzled silence, then look back to the driver. 'You want me to get in?'

A nod in reply.

All wide eyed innocence. 'In there?'

Another nod.

'But what if it's all icky and stuff?'

Both horses give the distinct impression they are laughing, laughing at the creatures responsible for their forced servitude and all their little expectations of one another. Laughing in the way only horses can.

The driver just gives the impression of staring at her again.

The door opens wider, exposing the utter lack of light within, an absence of light that seems to lurk like a thing alive, waiting to devour everything foolish enough to enter it. As the Doctor stares harder, the vaguest of shapes begins to manifest, with only the pitiful light of a miserably sodden day to give it form. She takes a step backwards, hands clasped pointedly behind her back.

'Um, I think not,' she shakes her head, disturbed and disquieted.

The force she applies to the door in order to close it threatens to break something. That something strikes the other side of the door in something that might be anger, or something else entirely.

Impassively as ever, the driver starts the horses moving. After a little while, the carriage disappears into the gloom.

'Another time, perhaps...' she mutters before turning back to the other woman. 'I think this voice of yours has a good idea what it's talking abo -'

She stops.

The woman in red stands a few feet away, chiselled features utterly calm, a copperish cast to her skin. However, her eyes - pools of nacreous ochre with neither pupil nor iris - contain a pure, untainted rage.

'Get away from her!' she snarls, stalking towards the Doctor, her musculature moving beneath her suit in subtle ways that a human's never could.

'You're back!' the other woman exclaims happily as the Doctor stays her ground. It is a reaction that causes the newcomer to ever so briefly smile, something warm touching her face as the rage in her eyes dims. Then she looks at the Doctor again, and the hostility returns.

'This is your 'voice'?' the Doctor asks, surprise almost absent from her own.

'Don't tell her anything,' the woman in red warns the other, making a sharp cutting gesture with her hand. 'She'll use it against us.'

'You're one of us, aren't you?' the Doctor asks, feeling herself grow tense, wondering if the newcomer is as powerless as she in this state of almost-death. 'One of the people who call themselves the Doctor.'

'Neither of us belong to your cursed sisterhood,' the woman in red spits out the words distastefully. 'Not any more. Not ever again. Our lives are ours, and there's nothing you or anyone else can do to stop me.'

'I saw enough at the club to know you have to kill someone to bring her back to our side of the divide,' the Doctor vehemently shakes her head, ignoring the ache of sympathy she feels for this woman, ignoring what it is that she might have become. 'You used to be what I still am; you *have* to know I *can't* let that happen.'

'What does she mean, kill someone?' the other demands, a look of alarm on her face as she tries to conceptualise the idea behind the words.

'This!' the woman in red snarls, flinging out her arm, hand clenching into a fist around the handle of a sword she hadn't been carrying a split second ago. The weapon's design is elegant in its simplicity, residual wisps of psionic energy coruscating around the dull silver blade before bleeding off into the ether.

An instinctual lunge backwards is the only thing that prevents the Doctor's viscera from spilling in the wake of her adversary's opening lunge. Landing on her side, she rolls back onto her feet.

'If you're not dead already, Doctor, you will be soon,' comes the determined promise on the heels of another attack she back peddles away from. 'Saving your friends has cost you, I can *feel* it. Feel the numbness where your power should be singing and strong.'

She's right, the Doctor curses. *I've never walked the pathways with so many before. And now I know why.*

'Will she thank you for this?' she replies to the taunt with her own. 'You might have stopped caring about what I represent, but she died for it! She won't thank you for this, and you know it!'

'Just shut up and die you blind little fool!'

The Doctor cries out as the sword cuts deeply into her thigh.

Clasping her hand against the heavily bleeding wound, she takes two quick steps backwards only to find herself up hard against the wall of the warehouse.

'We can do this together! There's no need to kill anyone!'

The sword is drawn back.

Tell that to your gods.'

The blade plunges home.

Her rise to consciousness is signalled by a single bass beat and a blinding light that bleeds out into the dark palette of the world. She makes that rise screaming: at the pain burning through her body, the fire racing through her heart.

Nathan's is the first face she sees, the familiar presence she seeks amongst the wet and the stench and the gloom and the pain of her own body. Only after her friend's face fills her perception does she become aware of the periphery - her head in Max's lap, Corporal Mariel Lisi pulling an adrenalin needle from her heart, the soldier on either side holding her still.

Nathan stoops closer, relief and worry fighting for dominance, only to be replaced by confusion when a small chuckle wracks her body.

'I can feel you,' she says, explaining everything and nothing.

Admittedly only weakly, but his thoughts and feelings are there, lapping at the very edges of her awareness along with those of everyone else.

'I thought we'd lost you.'

'You did,' she answers, fighting back a sudden wave of pain. 'We have a problem.'

'We'd noticed,' Max replies in her usual cynical fashion.

'Not this,' the Doctor shakes her head a little in irritation, only to think immediately better of it. 'They're not here.'

'Where then?' Drinnian asks over Nathan's shoulder. There's something resigned in his voice, like a child being forced to take his medicine.

'Where this whole thing started almost a year and a day ago -' A sudden need to cough up some of the blood beginning to coagulate in her lungs interrupts her exposition. But Nathan and the others all know where.

The warehouse by the ruined jetty.

'How -?'

'I'll explain later,' she waves the occultist's question aside tiredly, unpleasantly aware that the world has suddenly grown fuzzy around the edges. 'But I know about things like this, trust me.'

The slowly melting lozenge of the sun touches the horizon, invisible beyond the storm. Its absence robbing them of their ability to lengthen in their usual fashion, the shadows instead grow more intense, bleeding together into a gloomy morass that oozes over the city.

Dark shapes flit amongst the buildings near the quayside: people in oilskin coats move with practised stealth, communicating only by waves of a hand or nod of a head. The expressions on their faces are grim, a combination of concern and anger hidden beneath a mien of professionalism.

When they reach the periphery of the final stretch of open space between themselves and the warehouse, the soldiers crouch down and remain still, weapons at the ready.

About a hundred metres behind them, a darkly coloured minibus lurks in the shadows of a slaugterhouse. There is something squat and aggressive about it that cannot easily be put into words, a combination of little deviations from the mundane. Protected from the worst of the elements by facing the stonework, the passenger door is open, allowing the Doctor to sit on the steps in silent meditation.

Behind her are Nathan, Max and Sergeant Joe Pridham, all looking at a bank of small monitors. Each screen is labelled with a piece of masking tape bearing a person's name, and depicts a slightly different view of the warehouse and its environs in the lurid green of night-vision. They, like the Doctor, are dressed as the other soldiers: an oilskin coat over basic black fatigues.

'I hope Falcone's right about this,' Nathan mutters, finally giving voice to the thought that has been floating in his head for the past hours.

'He usually is about these things,' Max shrugs. 'It sorta makes up for him being a gimp some of the time. You ready for this, Doc?'

The Doctor gives a small nod, eyes opening slowly. 'I almost wish we didn't have to interfere with her, you know.'

'That hospital bed tempting you after all?' Nathan asks, flicking a glance at her before pushing a button on the console. A moment later, the images change colour as the cameras worn by the soldiers shift into the infrared.

'You have no idea how much,' she agrees, looking sadly in the direction of the warehouse and the deaths about to occur there. 'How many are there?'

'Nine,' Joe answers. 'Eight moving, two stationary in the centre of the structure. The one lying down must be the intended sacrifice. This one here has a noticeably different body temperature from the others.'

Max pulls away from the huddle and opens the rear doors. She pulls the Doctor's wheelchair out after her and pushes it around to the side of the minibus. She sees and senses the trepidation the younger woman feels, and smiles reassuringly.

'Falcone, any mystic stuff waiting for us?' Nathan asks, putting his own headset on. A previously blank screen lights up, showing the computer console.

'Nothing obvious,' the young man's whispered voice replies over the radio. 'There's a building of forces inside, though.'

'You think she's realised?'

'About the leap year, Colonel? No. But we should hurry. Just in case.'

'We're on our way.' Placing his hand over the mike, he sighs "Just in case" and follows Max outside, locking the doors behind him. Coming around the side, he picks up the Doctor and places her in the chair. 'You know the drill, Sergeant.'

'Yes, Sir,' Joe salutes, then locks the side door.

Nathan and the women move off. 'Still feeling up to this?' he asks.

'No,' the Doctor answers for Max and herself. She doesn't mention she can feel the local anaesthetic paralysing her lower body starting to wear off.

'Good. Everyone, acquire your targets.'

Max snorts in cynical derision, her grip on the wheelchair's handles tightening. 'Roberts, give them the knock.'

Somewhere to their right comes a loud wooshing sound and a streak of fire burns through the shadows. Four seconds later, the huge metal door leading into the warehouse disappears in a confusion of sound and pyrotechnics.

She feels one of the men inside die. The single certain death offered by leaving the woman in red alone has been met. Any more, and it is the Doctor and her allies who will be in the red.

Grenade launchers go off on the left, ten or eleven hollow plooping noises followed seconds later by more shockwaves of sound and light inside the building as the flash packs detonate.

An awareness that another of the men has been hurt, his eardrums punctured. The sense of disorientation the others feel only increases when the canisters of sleep gas start to go off.

The gunfire begins, short bursts traded in both directions.

A surge of pain that isn't the Doctor's own fills her - the woman in red sharing the pain of an injury, along with her rage.

Words that were ancient before the Earth had been created swell across the night in a voice barely recognisable as Drinnian's. The fabric of reality ripples slightly, setting the Doctor's nerves on edge, and pulling away even more of the cushion the drugs have been providing her.

The spell is answered by a scream that frightens even the Doctor.

'Nathan, get everyone out of here!' she yells before she's even aware of having opened her mouth. 'Max, help Marie! with Drinnian.'

'Everyone, this is it!' her friend shouts into his headset as Max darts away. 'Fall back to the secondary perimeter!' Giving her hand a tight squeeze, he too joins the exodus.

One heartbeat.

Two.

With the third, the woman in red emerges through the miasma, a brilliant red stain marring the torn sleeve of her suit, her alien nature exposed and burning bright. As before, her face shows none of the emotions held in her eyes.

'Why won't you die?' Honest puzzlement.

'The universe needs the Doctor.' Honest belief.

'The universe needs you like a hole in the head.' Disdainful sneer.

'Those holes are called eyes. You see through them. So does the universe.'

The sheer savagery of the psychic assault topples the Doctor backwards out of her wheelchair and onto the ground. The last vestiges of drug-induced numbness evaporate, the debilitating pain of her injuries returning in full as half a dozen of the stitches holding her together break. But the blatant openness of the attack gives her the opportunity she needs to slip past her opponent's defences...

'Cathayan, wait!'

'Your disciple just tried to sever the tenuous hold she has to this plane. You've stolen my name, though I don't how you managed to take it. Why should I?' There is a brittle quality to the woman's voice as she makes her demand, a sense of tiredness the Doctor understands to the core of her own soul.

'Because you love her enough to let go!' the Doctor pleads, using the palm of her hand to staunch the renewed bleeding.

'And I love her enough to bring her back!' Each word of Cathayan's angry exclamation is punctuated by a tweak of reality that breaks another of the Doctor's sutures. 'I deliberately spared your friends who couldn't save her because they share my grief. But now they've sided with you, destroyed what I spent a year creating for this moment, I have no choice.'

'You always have a choice,' she spits back, forging her anger into a wall against the pain. 'And that choice is to let me help you in the only way I can, or in six hours you'll lose your chance forever.'

'What are yo -'

'You're a day out,' the Doctor interrupts, her words cutting though she doesn't utter them so. 'The rules we follow say a year and a day, and they don't make allowances for a calendar with an extra day every four years.' She pauses, shoring up the wall as it continually crumbles. 'You've spent yourself too dearly fighting us to bring her back on your own in the time you have left.'

Cathayan takes a step backwards, wearing the sick expression of someone realising a truth their soul desperately needs them to deny. It's soon replaced by one of raw desperation as she grabs the Doctor by the shirt and lifts her face to her own.

'If you really want to help, tell me your name. Your true name. The one you gave the Doctor.'

The Doctor tells her. Not with words, but the deepest intimacy of one mind touching another.

The rain, until now a miserably steady drizzle, finally stops.

Reality blinks.

Dawn paints the gently rippling waters of the bay in shades of molten gold, and suffuses the air with a soft warmth that seems almost foreign in the wake of yesterday's storm.

The minibus sits outside the warehouse, its doors casually open, a portable satellite dish placed upon its roof. A cable runs from the dish into the side of the laptop computer Max has perched on her knees where she sits just inside the vehicle, reading her e-mail. Every so often, she casts a glance in the building's direction.

A few metres away, the off-white van - now sporting a label reading 'United Catering' on either side - also has its doors open. Some of the soldiers are clustered around it, making their choice from the warm meals on display within. They too keep checking the warehouse for some sign of activity.

A second minibus, the same colour as the van, metal grilles over its windows, is parked a short distance away, three soldiers standing guard around it. Inside, Cathayan's employees are also wolfing down breakfast, heedless of the added burden of their handcuffs. One or two of them even look pleased.

Nathan stands at the foot of the jetty, in earnest conversation with someone on the other end of a satellite phone. Though he keeps his voice low, to anyone watching his body language betrays the fact that the discourse isn't entirely amicable.

'Idiotic jackass,' he swears, cutting the connection. He looks ready to hurl the phone into the bay, but the sound of movement from within the warehouse distracts him.

A second later Drinnian staggers out, in the manner of someone barely able to muster the energy to walk. His hair hangs lankly around his face, the pallor of his skin makes the dark rings underneath his sunken eyes even more noticeable, and sweat plasters his clothes to his body. Max and Mariel rush to help him, even as Nathan does the same.

Drinnian collapses forward onto his knees, then rolls over.

'He's asleep,' the Doctor says from behind, looking even more haggard than the occultist and feeling considerably worse. A thin trail of blood has crusted dry between her nose and mouth, and beyond the rank odour of her sweat there is the subtle stench of death.

'You guys look like shit,' declares Max without preamble. 'What the hell have you been doing in there?'

'Barely enough,' she sighs tiredly, ignoring the two soldiers who are picking up Drinnian and helping Max taking him to the minibus. She finds it harder to do the same to Mariel as the medic's gently proficient hands examine her.

'What sort of barbarian cauterised this?' she clucks disdainfully. A fingertip lightly brushes the bands of still suppurating scar tissue that has replaced the ruptured sutures. The touch makes the Doctor wince, threatening to push down the ragged remains of the wall she's erected around the pain.

'It was either that or let her bleed to death,' Cathayan's voice states coldly some seconds before she steps out of the warehouse's shadowy interior. Eyes dull and lustreless, she too has been harrowed to the point of collapse by the deeds of the last hours, yet manages to maintain a vague air of composure. Though it's difficult to distinguish against the material, there is a relatively fresh blood stain between her breasts.

Everyone's attention is focusing upon the small group now, puzzlement and expectation on their faces and in their thoughts. The Doctor bats Mariel's hand away tiredly while Cathayan looks back inside. 'It'll heal. Where is she?'

'Coming,' is the terse reply, her tone flecked with the warmth of a smile directed at one very particular person.

A moment's pregnant pause, and the woman who was once the Doctor emerges into the daylight for the first time.

'Buddha,' Mariel whispers.

'I'd say Christ myself,' Nathan adds. 'I'm seriously impressed. I didn't think you guys would pull it off.'

That is because you are a small being, Cathayan's disdainful thought brushes up against the Doctor's mind.

'Perhaps you'd care to introduce us?' she prompts, forcing herself to stay awake, and not react to that underlying current of superiority and bitterness. Both things are incredibly hard to do.

'This is Angelique,' the alien woman announces. 'Rather, it is the closest approximation your language allows.' Something about the way Cathayan speaks suggests the name is a new one of her own devising rather than the shade's true one.

'Hi,' Angelique smiles a little shyly, still unsure of the world and her place within it. Cathayan squeezes her hand encouragingly. 'I don't know any of you, but I remember you from this morning. You were all sad.[1]

'We were remembering how you died saving us,' Nathan explains, taking a step forward, more nervous with the shade of a friend than in the face of an alien invasion. 'Urn, I'm Nathan. This is Mariel. That's Max, next to Drinnian, who I think you've probably met. Joe, Guy, Anna, Daniel, Jenny, Jamie and Alyks are all standing there. And that's Leon, Eugene and Ben over by the bus. Urn, yeah.' *Jeez, this feels waaay too weird.*

You'll get used to it, the Doctor sends back with the mental equivalent of a shrug, subtly resting her weight against her friend. Seeing the slightly blank look on Angelique's face, she pats the shade's other hand. 'You're going to be around for a while, so you'll be able to learn who's who.'

The blood rushes from her head, turning the world white.

'She is?'

The identity of the speaker is lost as the Doctor, utterly worn out beyond even her limits, collapses.

The next coherent perception of the world the Doctor has is of a darkened room illuminated only by several fragrant candles guttering low in their holders. Her exhaustion is gone, the pain of her injuries reduced to a dull throb. There is satin against her skin, and something at the back of her mind trying to draw attention to itself. A nagging sense of familiarity with the aura of this place...

Club Feel.

She sits up, the sheet crumpling into her lap. Not quite panicked, but feeling a little unsure. However, the sparsely furnished room provides no obvious threat, and there is no sense of anything malignant beyond its confines.

A perfunctory examination reveals that though her clothes are gone, she still bears the grime of the previous night's arduous working. It also finds Cathayan asleep next to her in much the same state, features softened in repose but still almost glacially impassive. The candlelight glints off the shard of crystal newly embedded in the alien woman's sternum.

She remembers how loudly the other woman had screamed when it had been thrust into her, something the Doctor hadn't expected her to do.

Would I have done that if it were my Doctor we were binding to this realm? the Doctor asks herself. *Would I have forged one of his fetters into my being so willingly?*

Leaving her own question unanswered, she slips from under the covers, taking care not to disturb her bedmate. The slate tiles are cold but smooth against her feet, raising a light sprinkle of goosebumps along the back of her legs.

It takes little effort to find the bathroom hidden behind a Japanese paper screen, an area sharing the same Spartan and vaguely spiritual aesthetic as the sleeping area. Instead of the apple and ginger scent she had awoken to, here there is the unmistakable aroma of camphor mingling with the faint tang of mineral salts.

Cathayan enters about ten minutes later, just as the Doctor finishes drying herself. They both pause, each regarding the other warily, noticing those differences in physiology that make them alien to one another. Each remembering that a short while before, they had been enemies.

'Thank you,' they say at the same time, without meaning to.

'I haven't woken up like that for longer than I can remember,' the Doctor smiles a little.

'You put so much of yourself into bringing her back, you almost wore yourself through. And our clothes were tainted by the working,' Cathayan says, idly scratching at the inflamed skin around the crystal. 'There are some things in the wardrobe: I don't plan to stay much longer.'

Nodding, the Doctor runs her hand through her hair. 'Where's Angelique?'

'Talking with your friends. Her friends too. From before she died.'

She sounds slightly ambivalent about that, like she's unsure if she can trust Nathan and his people to do the right thing. Whatever that is.

Another nod and the Doctor walks outside.

She's unsurprised to discover that to an item, everything in the wardrobe is red. Different styles, different shades, occasionally a brief flash of something else, but always red. The colour of anger and passion and love.

A simple pantsuit wins out over some of the sportier or sexier outfits she uncovers, mostly because it's almost dark enough a shade to appear black in the dim light. Looking at herself in the mirror, she's forced to conclude that red just isn't her colour, being far too close to orange to be comfortable.

When her host emerges, the Doctor perches on the bed, looking towards the shuttered window and the sunlight slipping into the room. 'You couldn't get to her in time, could you?' she guesses, folding her towel neatly. 'You were both taking care of the problems of the universe, without the time for your own.'

Cathayan doesn't reply, but the silence as she dresses is answer enough.

'The greatest loss of my life made me choose to become the Doctor,' she continues sadly. 'The greatest loss of yours made you stop. What are you going to do now?'

'I meant what I said before. Neither of us can go back to being what you are.' There is still a simmering hatred underlying Cathayan's words that cannot be erased by any feelings of gratitude or indebtedness.

'I can't force you to be what you're not. I just do my best to stop bad things from happening when I can.'

'Then why not do it as yourself?' the other woman challenges, moving towards the door. 'Why wear the mask of the Doctor?'

'Honestly?' she asks, getting to her feet and following Cathayan outside. The absence of her coat makes her feel exposed.

'Yes.'

'The Doctor scares people. And monsters, and things from beyond the dawn of time.' She gestures, trying to indicate something tangible and not at the same time. 'The Doctor stands for something, something good and important and so very much bigger than I could ever be on my own. Giving up my name and some of those little things that made me ordinary seems like such a small price to pay to be a part of that. And it was the only way I could think of to honour the most important person in my life.'

'I felt like that once,' Cathayan says after a small pause. 'But when... Angelique died, everything came into focus. What was the point of fighting for what we do if we are denied it ourselves? And what's the point of fighting with one hand behind our back when those who stand against us are unrestrained. How does your kind put it? You have to... you have to break eggs to make an omelette.'

'You offered me your bed,' the Doctor points out gently.

'Old habits,' Cathayan smiles faintly. 'I can't abandon everything I believe in. But I can go about it differently, and as myself.'

'Just don't break too many,' she smiles back, but only half in jest. 'I understand you more than I want to, and I would hate to have to fight you. I'm not sure I could win.'

'We'll see,' is Cathayan's bemused response as they enter the bar area of the club.

Nathan and some of the others are there with Angelique. Max has her laptop set up on a table, displaying a slide show of the times when UNIT and Angelique's time as the Doctor had intersected. Drinnian, wearing sunglasses against the afternoon sunlight seeping in through the skylight, appears to be taking notes. A brick rests on ground next to Nathan's booted foot, and next to that is a carry bag.

'Cathayan,' Angelique calls out.

'Hey - Doc!' Max's greeting follows almost immediately. The others just wave casually in their direction as the two women stroll over to join them.

'How are you love?' asks Angelique affectionately, wrapping her arms around Cathayan, kissing her tenderly.

'All the better for you being here again,' her lover answers with uncharacteristic warmth, returning the embrace.

'How long?' the Doctor asks Nathan simply.

'It's been about thirty three hours,' he answers, finding her hand and giving it a squeeze beneath the level of the tabletop. The others can't see because they're too busy watching Cathayan and Angelique doing much the same.

'Have you done as we agreed, Colonel?' Cathayan enquires, no longer bothering to hide the elation she feels.

'Yup,' he answers, picking up the brick, regarding it in the manner reserved for something precious. Setting it back down, he points down past the floor grating to the dance pit. 'Sergeant Pridham dropped this and the others off a couple of hours ago, along with those weird crystal things. Doctor, I had to agree that you'd d -'

'I think I know what you mean,' she says, taking the brick, feeling the energies coursing through it. 'That's what I wanted to do with the wretched place anyway, so I won't ever have to go back there. Anywhere in particular, Cathayan?'

'Where you buried the Doctor and your daughter.' It's not quite a suggestion, not quite an order. But it is a surprise: she'd thought that particular little piece of information had been buried where no one rummaging in her head would be able to find it.

'Consider it done,' she nods, handing the brick over to her. 'But how?'

'You're not the only telepath able to take advantage of an opponent's weakness,' Cathayan answers a little archly, earning a soft poke in the side from Angelique along with the shade's implicit warning to behave.

Flashing her a grateful smile, the Doctor looks around the club again.

'I'm guessing that man you were going to sacrifice was the original owner?'

Cathayan nods, her free hand running through Angelique's hair, not quite avoiding the Doctor's eyes. 'His death would not have been a bad thing.'

'Local crime lord,' Nathan explains, his boot tapping the Doctor's ankle sharply when he sees she's about to argue the point. 'Sol's got him on ice, and is complaining bitterly about all the paperwork we've given him.'

'He'll live,' Max declares with little sympathy.

'Exactly,' Cathayan agrees, favouring Max with an expression of approval. 'You people can do whatever you wish with this place. We'll be back for those fetters in a little while. After that, I at least am never going to return to this wretched place.'

'Where are we going?' Angelique asks, finding Cathayan's hand again in a way the Doctor used to be familiar with.

'There's something we need to remember on our own.' She hefts the brick. 'And this will make sure you can always go there.'

Reality blinks.

'That was interesting,' Drinnian remarks to the emptiness the lovers have left in their wake.

'I suppose so,' Max shrugs, closing down her computer. 'It just seems so cliched, that whole 'Love bringing someone back from the dead' thing.'

'It's sad that as a culture we've reached the point where something so powerful can be considered that way,' he replies scathingly, getting to his feet and walking over to the bar. 'Even by a confirmed cynic like you.'

'What's sad is that I think you're right,' the hacker mutters under her breath before following him.

'Sometimes it's hard to believe they're friends and not lovers,' Nathan remarks quietly.

'Now who's being clichéd?' the Doctor teases, sitting next to him.

'Clichés were true once,' he counters, watching Max hop behind the bar and rummage amongst the alcohol for something drinkable. 'I think we use them so much because we hope they'll build up enough momentum and become real.'

'I know.'

'Present for you.' Picking up the bag, he hands it over to her. 'It took a friend in Geneva to knock a few bureaucratic heads together, but I think you'll like it.'

She reaches inside and pulls out a bundle of cloth that turns out to be a coat. Predominantly purple, it's a patchwork of different materials and colours. But it feels, and smells, so much more familiar than it looks.

'Is this...?'

'Yes,' he nods with a smile. 'He left it behind a few years ago when he was here, and it was packed off to the archives in Geneva. I thought with all the crap you've been through lately, it'd make you feel better.'

She hugs Nathan almost hard enough to break his ribs, then gets up and puts the coat on. 'Oohh, it does. It really doe -'

Drinnian's sharp bark of laughter at a whispered comment from Max distracts her.

'What?' her friend asks, missing the joke.

'Max finds it hard to believe we're friends and not lovers,' she answers, trying to keep a straight face.

Nathan looks at the two youngsters and

snickers. It proves too much and tips the Doctor over the edge.

It feels good to laugh. It feels even better with friends.

Apocalypse Angel
By
Finn Clarke

The Master had her son. Romana tore open the wall with her bare hands and swore as the titanium alloy ripped her palms; it was a stupid thing to do, but she needed to let her anger out somehow. Hateful light blazed in from her enemies' world. Somewhere out there was the Master. Romana hung in the freezing darkness and hissed like a vampire, but her business could not wait. Screwing up her eyes, she flew into the light and a world vile beyond her worst imaginings.

It was repellently perfect. Nothing could be improved; the music was beautiful and the airborne chemicals induced only happiness and calm. She hated it all. The architecture was a dazzling array of masterpieces in need of despoiling; its church-like walls soaring far above her head would have been greatly improved by a human sacrifice or two. Romana ached to spray obscenities on its walls and lead a war dance down its elegant corridors, leaving blood and flickering darkness in her wake. She was a troglodyte that had crawled into heaven, and proud of it. The light-dwellers would kill her if they learned that she was back, and rightly too. Romana flew up to the ceiling and hovered there as her eyes adjusted, then flew off at top speed.

The Master's chapel was around here somewhere, if she could only remember where. With every moment that passed she expected a shout, or a shot. She could smell the light-dwellers. Where were they? She flew fast and straight, but to her annoyance soon realised that something was playing with her perceptions, making her think the walls were trying to hit her. Steering became almost impossible. Barely in control of her flight, it felt like the sinister random tugging of an imminent gray-shield failure though of course it was nothing but her own weak-mindedness. Visual hallucinations appeared too - hull cracks, blazing with angry light. It just proved what she'd always said: this place messed up your head. Calling it heaven was a joke.

Where was that damned chapel? She flew blindly down endless oppressive corridors, navigating by instinct, and at last the labyrinth ended in a pair of arched double doors. Magnificent with machonite and silver, their carvings seemed to writhe as she accelerated towards them. Power seethed there, discharging sparks. Romana tested the doors mentally, then mindblasted them from their frame as she burst through the wreckage like a torpedo. They reformed and slammed shut behind her of course, so she mindformed bars to lock them shut before ascending in search of her nemesis.

Even for a woman used to the void of infrastructure, the air seemed cold. Romana rose cautiously, constantly watching. This was the Master's chapel, though cathedral would have been a better word. Light from the dying universe outside blazed through the shields, burning out all colour and creating illusions of stained glass windows. Here were altars of computer banks, walkways, dangling cables... and an apparently infinite drop that made the head spin. In this shrine, the Master worshipped power. Like her, he was a freak. Immortality had not killed his passions, but instead had swelled them into a boiling rage almost too great for his physical frame. He retained all his old charm, but the monster beneath was barely concealed.

'My dear...' purred a familiar voice from nowhere, then the Master's mind grabbed hers. The shock was so great that it took Romana a few seconds to realise she wasn't flying any more.

She dropped into the white void. A cable brushed her hand and she grabbed it, but one end snapped and she crashed into a walkway. 'You know what I want!' she shouted, desperately trying to recover her strength. If she lost her mental powers now, she was as good as dead.

'My dearest girl, what you want hardly matters.'

The disembodied voice mocked her.

'You're a criminal and a terrorist.'

'You'd know about that!' Romana heard electrons move in wires; time was running out. 'Where's my son?'

'He has forfeited his right to life.'

'You have no right to kill him!' Romana protested, but of course the Master had every right. Draco had been her ultimate crime, the creation of new life. He had since betrayed her by becoming a light-dweller, but whether he liked it or not he was still useful as her spy and reluctant ally in the war against her own people. He was her soldier in the enemy's camp. 'What did he do?' she eventually asked.

The Master's tone lost its jocularity. 'Threatened the ship.'

Absurd. Draco would as soon have coveted his neighbour's ox. 'You've got to be joking...'

Clouds gathered; the atmosphere grew ominous and Romana realised her mistake.

'Get out,' said the Master.

Romana tried another tack. 'He wouldn't do it again! It must have been a miscalculation or something. You know Draco! There's no need -'

'It's what I want.' The Master interrupted her, his voice as hard as a guillotine blade. 'I have my duty.'

'*Duty?* Romana nearly shrieked. Duty was a lie invented by worms and jobsworths, but in the Master's mouth, it was almost an obscenity. *'You?* Look, how about a compromise? We could fight a duel; if you win, Draco dies...'

There was a dark chuckle. 'How touching. Willing to duel for the life of her son. Your offer is refused.'

With difficulty, Romana made herself smile. 'Worried you'd lose?'

'My patience is wearing thin,' was the only reply before the weather started up again.

The cathedral's clouds grew dark and heavy as the wind blew in earnest, growing in seconds from a breeze to full gale force. Howling air smashed into Romana as she clung to the walkway, expecting any moment to be torn away and sucked into the void.

'If Draco dies, you do!' she screamed into the hurricane. 'That's a promise!'

Snapped cables whipped her as the walkway twisted. Romana curled into a foetal position and let herself fall into space; after several nightmarish seconds she even managed to fly.

She eventually reached the infrastructure; only then did Romana relax. This was her home, the lightless void apart from the others' world. Here she could fly for months through darkness, with no one to ruin the pleasures of freezing cold and sensory deprivation. Apart from her, the void was uninhabited. Here she could be herself.

It was tempting to hide away forever, licking her wounds. No one knew the ship's innards like her. Once it had been a space station, the secret site of a renegade's trial before the revolution came. Now it was the last home of the Time Lords. The universe was entering its death throes and there was no escape for anyone; space-time had collapsed upon itself and even the Time Spiral was a distant memory. Paralysed and impotent, the light-dwellers waited for death. Romana found their attitude obscene.

After a while, a possible solution to the Draco problem presented itself. Romana uncurled, bat-like, from her perch and flew off into the blackness. After several hours of blind flight, she found a rib of the ship's monstrous skeleton and followed that until she reached a cable of its nervous system. Anxious clouds of robots flew about her in the dark, but she ignored them and followed the stream of ship-consciousness as it merged with other streams to make a river that flowed into the ocean of electronic awareness. Here was the ship's pilot, neither wholly organic or electronic. Once he had been the father of his people but now he was a slave, floating in the void and wired to sixty billion eyes and ears throughout the ship. There was nothing he didn't know.

'Great Rassilon,' said Romana in homage as she connected herself to his matrix. His acknowledgement was distant and inhuman, but she asked her question. He didn't know the answer.

Impossible! Romana repeated her query, probing hard, but found nothing about Draco or a recent near-disaster. She then asked Rassilon to make deductions from what he DIDN'T know, extrapolate from the holes in his memory and use the ship's near-infinite processing capacity to construct a model for what had happened. Your son destroyed the universe in a game of dice, replied Rassilon. Romana disconnected herself and returned to her darkness.

Only one man had the answers. Again she would have to see the light, though this time she would keep her enemy at arm's length. Using her recent memories, she flew to the outside of a particular corridor and waited until HIS heat signature passed by. She counted to fifty, then tore open the ceiling and flew in.

The Master's chapel was easy to break into, but once there the enormity of her task daunted her. She could spend months uselessly searching this cathedral. When she shut her eyes against the hateful light, however, her other senses showed her the answer. Rassilon's matrix was no ordinary computer bank, so wiping its memory took surgery. The stench of rotting flesh led her to the blood evidence of the Master's sabotage. Beneath an altar was hidden a sacrifice to himself: scalpels, gore and glistening meat. She checked its decomposition, then plugged in a reader and stuck the needles into her eye.

Wire filaments slid through her eyeball into her retina and fused with the optic nerve. Information swamped her. It roared through her neural pathways, overriding anything else that might have been trying to pass through. Her body spasmed and for several seconds actually died until her regenerative abilities took over to reverse the heart attacks and wrest control of the body from the temporarily paralysed brain. Romana was barely aware of this, overwhelmed as she was by the fight of absorbing so much information.

Draco really had destroyed the universe. This fact screamed through every fibre of her brain, but it was too much to take in. She had to know why.

As with all impossibilities, it apparently concerned parallel universe theory. As had been proved long ago, there was exactly one parallel universe for every possible set of events. For every choice taken, your universe split to create a new universe for each possibility.

The crucial fact was that the total number of universes was finite. At the Big Bang there was only one universe, from which the others grew. Similarly at the Big Crunch there would only be one universe into which the others would have collapsed. Here at the end of everything, the number of possibilities was shrinking fast; universes were being sucked into their neighbours until at last there would be only one left, containing nothing.

Theoretically you could calculate those mergers, especially since the cosmic collapse had entered its final stages. Seemingly random events might dictate which universe yours merged with. Victory in a game of dice might mean merging with a version of the universe whose laws of physics allowed a flaw in the space-time fabric that would mean the destruction of everything in a very few centuries.

That was what had happened. Unbelievable. The hull cracks had been real. Had Draco done it deliberately? Surely not; he must have made a miscalculation or something. No wonder the Master had wanted to keep this to himself. Romana pulled the needles from her eye and waited for her vision to return as her regenerative abilities healed the damage.

The death of the universe. Ridiculous.

Romana smiled twistedly. Of course Draco's greater crime would have been originality, a new thought in a universe that had known nothing new since the last stars boiled away in the ever-rising cosmic radiation. Originality was a hanging offence among these well-spoken zombies without anything so shocking as imagination or a personality. Immortality did things to you. It polished your mind away, leaving a smiling polite shell that went about its business without passion or life, waiting for the end with obscene calm. Maybe that was why Romana felt attracted to the Master; at least he still had some vitality. Sometimes she wondered what might have happened if the Master hadn't killed the Doctor.

Their son, a worker of wonders. It hadn't been done before, so people had thought it impossible.

The Master would be here soon. Romana folded her arms and waited.

He didn't take long. The double doors opened by themselves, then slammed shut with a blast of wind apparently without having admitted even a mouse. A hiss filled the chapel as the air swirled, the lights throbbed and the temperature fell.

'Is Draco still alive?' Romana shouted, not knowing where to look.

'That's the *least* of your worries,' said the Master behind her. She tried to turn, but something seized her mind and suddenly she couldn't move. Her telekinesis failed, her breathing ceased and her chest writhed as her regenerative powers tried to redesign her body for life without a heartbeat. She mustered her willpower for a fight, but she couldn't even affect him. How could the Master be so strong? Had he evolved over the last few aeons?

'Talk...' she managed to croak.

The Master gripped her harder in shock, cracking bones, but the pain was lovely. Cold spread through her as her lungs shut down.

'We have nothing to talk about,' said the Master, releasing her.

With difficulty, Romana made an old Earth gesture. 'The universe is being destroyed and you say there's nothing to talk about...'

'Silence!'

Energy seared her, but this time she was expecting it. Feeding back energy on the same frequency he was using, she set up a resonance pattern that nearly vibrated her bones to jelly before something overloaded. Her nose and ears bled, while shrapnel and heat blasted her as a power relay exploded nearby. She hurt in ways she had forgotten, but at least she could move again. When the Master spoke, his voice was hoarse.

'I have other weapons.'

'If they're all that effective...'

'My dear,' said the Master. 'I cannot let the discoveries to which you referred become known.'

'You're just going to sit on them?' Romana couldn't believe it. 'You're turning down our only chance to put things right! Use the tools that Draco discovered. Parallel universe calculations might be able to steer us into a viable universe again.'

His tone was dismissive. 'Impossible.'

'What if you're wrong?'

There was silence, then something moved behind her. Did he still want her dead?

'I need no help for such research,' he whispered, his beard tickling her ear.

Romana tried not to flinch. 'Of course not,' she said sarcastically. 'As if I'd let you out of my sight. I'd find myself ceasing to exist by mysterious coincidence as a coin came down heads. No, we're working on this together - after you've released Draco.'

That really annoyed him. 'Never!'

'So he is alive!' said Romana gleefully. 'Come on;

we could do anything! Haven't you ever wanted to be God? Play dice with the universe!'

There was a long silence.

It took a week to complete the calculations, during which time the space-time flaw became a navigational hazard orbiting the black hole in a flight pattern that regularly threatened to destroy the ship. Naturally the light-dwellers paid no attention and left the hard work of evading it to Rassilon. It didn't help that the Master was also using him to work out the parallel universe configurations. Romana considered helping out with the work, but eventually decided that she couldn't be bothered and just spent the week reading. Since the Master despised theology with poisonous intensity, she studied human apocalyptic writings like the Apocalypse of Peter, the Shepherd of Hermas and the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation, just to annoy him. She suspected that the Master liked to regard himself as God and disliked any mention of the genuine article through professional jealousy.

The calculations concerned Draco. It seemed that his mistake was indeed irreversible, so Romana suggested using HIM for experimentation and the Master agreed. If all went according to plan, Draco would make an amazing discovery. At the appointed time, the Master and Romana flew to the upper reaches of a chapel and fought a duel to its required conclusion. The Master surrendered at the agreed moment, though by then he had sneakily inflicted two mortal wounds on Romana. Perhaps he was testing her strength with a view to killing her later; she said nothing and let her body regenerate the damage. After all the Master needed medical attention too, not the least of his wounds being an arm severed at the shoulder.

Romana had wanted to use a simpler event to fix the choice of parallel universes, but the Master had insisted that a duel would be more fun.

'When will we know?' she asked.

'It is done,' he purred, his eyes closed as if tasting the pain.

He was right; Draco did indeed make the predicted breakthroughs. Romana watched his progress from afar and manipulated reality with the Master regularly over the following weeks. Draco's achievements were hers now. Eventually even this became boring however, so the Master started causing disasters: flood, famine, war, pestilence and other catastrophes. Immortals died for their amusement, though Romana refused to let the Master kill everyone, even when he pointed out that they were all doomed anyway.

Then Draco learned what they were doing.

Afterward, Romana remembered that he had been angry, but no more. When she tried to recall his words or even his face, it was like trying to pin down a nightmare after waking in the early hours of the morning. Nothing of her son was recognisable in the force of nature that her memory insisted had screamed into their presence, howling and blazing with fire. Elemental rage had taken form and roared. She remembered no threats, but she knew that to cross his will meant death. He had commanded them to stop their manipulations and they had. It was that simple.

Had they changed him? Had their route across the universes changed Draco into some monster that didn't belong in this world? He was no longer the naive creature that the Master had mindwiped and imprisoned, though it hardly mattered any more. The universe was dying ever faster. The temperature outside reached billions of degrees as the ferocious background radiation threatened to send the temperature high enough to break down atomic nuclei. The ship was in danger. Engineers worked unceasingly, inspired by Draco and his miracles. Romana hardly needed to hide from the light-dwellers any more, since no one cared whether she lived or died. It was a time of more important things, the time of the apocalypse.

Nevertheless she missed the duels. Could she find a parallel universe that was worth defying Draco's orders and steering into? It took her weeks to realise that one existed, and months to carry out the necessary calculations. She checked and double-checked the results, then took two swords to the Master's chapel and showed him her figures

It took him a few seconds to see their significance, then he hit the roof. 'The existence of God?!'

She nodded. 'Good, eh?'

The Master did not speak, but his facial muscles went into spasm. Romana watched him gleefully.

'You like it?' she asked eventually.

'LIKE it?' The Master seemed slightly incoherent. 'You're insane. Supernatural deities do not exist.'

'Argue with Rassilon's figures,' said Romana brightly. 'God can't be proved unreal, thus there's a non-zero probability of His existence and at least one parallel universe containing Him. Look at the calculations.'

The Master hissed.

'Rassilon's numbers -'

'Are meaningless if you program him with absurd initial conditions!'

'Scared to fight?' said Romana teasingly. This wasn't like the Master, but perhaps he really was frightened. If God really did prove to exist, then the

Master could expect a nightmarish afterlife. Then again, perhaps it was simple jealousy.

'I need not fight to prove the obvious.'

'No, you're scared,' said Romana, to provoke him. She tossed him a sword, which he smashed aside with his mind and thereafter ignored. 'Oh, be a sport. Fight me! Just think... you could kill God!'

The Master's eyebrows raised, then he extended a hand and the sword flew into it. Glancing down at the figures, he smiled. 'Why not? You've convinced me. It's an amusing little wager.'

She swung her sword into a guarde position. 'Shall we?'

The Master swung his sword at her neck.

Romana only just avoided decapitation. She fought back immediately, but it became clear that the Master had been holding back in his previous duels. The sword whirled in a wall of steel, advancing with a fury she needed all her skill to fend off. He'd never fought so well before - but, she suspected, neither had she. This was their first true contest. There had never been so much at stake: the existence of God and thus the immortal souls of everyone who had ever lived in the entire history of the universe. Of course if God did exist then Romana would probably end up in hell, but anything would be better than another heaven.

Her arm sprayed blood. She flew upward for temporary advantage, which also offered new angles of attack. A lightning fast flick of her blade severed the major arteries and tendons in the Master's sword hand; instantly his weapon jumped to his other hand and he faded into nothingness. The Master had developed his telekinetic powers less than Romana, but the chapel was his territory. She could expect unpleasant surprises. Fortunately she had ordered Rassilon in advance to seal all exits until the fight was over. Romana flew up from the floating platform, flipped in mid-air and headed on a guess for the starboard exit.

He was there, his wounded hand already cauterised into a hissing lump. In his other hand was a gun. Blaster bolts cooked the air around her. Romana wondered briefly whether this counted as cheating, but then decided that it hardly mattered. Desperately she started parrying the blaster bolts with her sword, a technique she'd practiced before but never had a chance to use in anger. He was aiming for the head and chest, which made the bolts easier to block. One bolt splashed around the sword to blister her face; the pain was refreshing, but she had been in the open too long. Putting up her sword, Romana mindgrabbed the nearest floating platform and slammed it into the hull wall between them.

Snapped cables and torn walkways whipped like angry snakes as smoke exploded from the wall; a cry on the other side suggested that the Master had not escaped unscathed.

Suddenly her pain was agony. She touched her face and the flesh came away on her fingers. How amusing; at least this wasn't going to be a dull walkover. She had known too much boredom over the aeons, she thought, then slammed her head against the wall and screamed at herself.

She had let the Master fool her! Clearing her mind, she saw her body to be a charred ruin, ravaged by blaster bolts. No wonder it hurt! The Master had been twisting her mind! Since when had it been possible to parry blaster bolts with a sword? Not content with exploiting her eagerness to fight, he had made her believe in the silliest science-fiction idea of all time.

'Surrender,' came the Master's voice.

'Drop dead,' said Romana. If he could use his powers, she could too. Striking before his telepathy could detect her intentions, she reached out with her telekinesis, analysed his heat signature and mindpulled his head from his body. There wasn't even a scream. There was a wet ripping sound, followed by horrible splashing noises, but his regenerative powers ensured that even those soon stopped. The head was far below, falling almost out of sight into the blazing depths of the chapel. Romana dived after it, caught it up and grabbed its beard. It swore soundlessly and tried to bite her.

'Surrender?' said Romana.

'Drop dead,' the head mouthed, but its consciousness was already fading. Romana crunched it against a platform and stuck her sword in the stump of its neck, but it was either dead or unconscious. Victory and a chance to mutilate the Master. Now Romana knew there was a God.

When the Master regained consciousness, forty days later, his first words were, 'God does not exist.'

Romana examined his revolting new body. The Master was hardly a stranger to an undead existence, but horror on this scale was exceptional even for him. Faced with an impossible job, his regenerative abilities had understandably taken things steady and not over-taxed themselves. The Master resembled a foetus being gnawed by rats, with his perfect head on top being the ultimate horribly surreal touch. Romana flapped a hand to acknowledge his words; the man was delirious.

'He doesn't!' the Master insisted, clearly enraged by her attitude.

'You're not normally this irrational,[1] said Romana. 'We created God, remember? I don't think atheism is particularly defensible any more. Anyway, even if you don't care about your eternal soul, you might at least show some paternal affection.'

The Master grunted as if she'd punched him. 'Created God? Don't be absurd. How could we move from a universe without God to a universe containing Him? Surely the two multiverses must be discontinuous? Ergo God cannot be created and your calculations are bunkum.'

'Are you saying you're cleverer than Rassilon?' said Romana innocently. The Master's logic required at least two universes at the Big Bang, but that was a point to be saved up for later in the argument.

'At least I can spot impossible initial conditions!'

'Of course you can,' said Romana, then poked him in the abdomen and sat back to listen to the screams. Five minutes of vocalised hatred followed, whereupon the Master's new lungs collapsed under the strain and he just thrashed and gurgled for a while. Romana patted his head, which seemed to drive him mad with rage. 'My dear old chap,' she said happily, 'who have you been talking to? Someone's been rotting your brain.'

The Master roared at her telepathically. 'Talk to

Draco. Even YOU might learn something!'

'Ah,' said Romana, no longer smiling.

How had it come to this? Sent to learn lies from her own son, though he wasn't her son any more but a creature of his own making. He had gained authority over every tribe, people, tongue and nation, and all who dwelled there worshipped him. He was a deceiver of men, spreading false doctrine, and a worker of wonders. He was not even a man any more, but a dragon. Draco: the Beast. Soon he would cause all to be marked on the right hand or the forehead, so that no one could buy or sell unless they had the mark: the name of the beast or the number of its name.

She had overlooked what was happening under her own nose. Romana summoned Draco to her chapel and it came. At least that of her son was left. It greeted her warmly, but she wasn't fooled.

Could she kill the Antichrist? What would happen to the prophecies?

'Hello, Draco.' Romana felt slightly hysterical.

'Are you all right, mother?'

That was clever. It was playing on her maternal instincts, trying to lull her into a false sense of security and make her doubt herself. Even that was sinister, however; it was pretending too hard. 'You can drop the act. I know what you are.'

It feigned puzzlement. 'I think you're ill. Let me help you -'

'Stay away!' Romana shouted, raising her gun. The enemy retreated hurriedly and she kept her aim steady, between the eyes. 'You want me to change my mind, don't you? You don't want to die.'

It hesitated. 'Well, no...'

'The deduction wasn't hard once I'd made the initial assumptions,' said Romana, hearing her voice climb ever higher into the realms of madness. Was it playing with her mind? She wasn't crazy. 'God definitely exists, therefore the Bible's true. Have you ever read the book of Revelations? The apocalypse, rivers of blood...'

It didn't speak. Was it getting ready to attack? Romana shifted the gun in her sweaty hand, ready to fire at any moment.

'You're the Antichrist,' said Romana. 'Not much mystery there, seeing as you're the only new birth in the past fifteen billion years. Not many rivals for the job.'

Still it remained silent. Perhaps it was planning its strategy, deciding how to counterattack. Its confused look was surely only meant to deceive... unless it hadn't yet realised what it was! Had she just made a huge mistake? She should shoot it now, before it learned the full extent of its powers. The gun seemed impossibly heavy; she steadied it in both hands. A trickle of sweat ran into her eye.

'Mother?'

'Don't try to distract me,' said Romana, trying to fire. It only looked like her son. She could prevent the apocalypse.

What if she was wrong?

'I've got a Bible here,' she said. 'Look yourself up. Apparently you'll be bound for a thousand years and thrown into the bottomless pit. I hear the black hole's rather nice this time of year.'

'Is that a threat?'

'No,' said Romana. Did its eyes just glow? 'I hear you've been telling people God doesn't exist.'

Its eyes were definitely glowing now. Sparks began flying, then suddenly Romana saw why the light-dwellers worshipped it. It was her son, but also a great dragon that filled the air, its breath like fire and its eyes like burning coals.

'I am what I am,' said the beast.

'What?' exclaimed Romana, disgusted. 'Are you saying you're just doing your job? That it's your *duty?'* If the most powerful being in the universe couldn't control its own destiny, what chance did anyone else have? Suddenly an idea came to her. She holstered her gun and cleared her dry throat, wondering if together they might have a chance of

averting Judgement Day. 'You've had a nasty attack of obedience, my lad. An old friend of mine would have had a few words to say about that. I think you'd have liked him. If all this is just a matter of duty, I've got a few suggestions for you...'

Oblique

Oblique Time - the so-called 'fourth state' of temporal existence - is a subject hardly worthy of mention, and certainly not a field for credible study. There are no parallel universes. There are no other dimensions. Regardless of the numerous legends and Collegiate folk tales, the existence of such alternate states of being has been proved impossible, and the only observable structures which even resemble such 'oblique' realms are (brief) pocket universes of anti-matter. Rassilon's own scientific council declared the mythical 'oblique' realms to have no practical meaning, hence the Academy's policy of non-research, and no proof has ever been presented that seriously challenges the accepted view.

The past and future can be mapped according to a precise, if complex geometry. All understanding of higher mechanics revolves around our grasp of the relative-present axis, and requires an absolute and immutable Gallifreyan point of origin in order to function. If Oblique Time states were to exist - if, for example, there really were such things as alternative universes - then time travel as we know it would quite simply be impossible. Everything that students are taught about temporal mechanics would be sheer nonsense. We would have to believe that TARDIS units don't really work at all, and that some unknown force was moving them around behind the scenes without any of us realising it. We would have to believe in a continuum of ghosts and shadows.

This is word of law. There are no exceptions.

- *Prinicipia Prinicipa I is,* third item on the recommended reading list, Arcalian Chapter Pre-Academy Induction School (suggested reading age: five years, two months).

The Next Universe but One
By
Dave Owen

All possible things do *happen, In some branch of reality. The key to entering these possibilities Is not to travel sideways In time, but backward and then forward into another branch.*

Dr John Gribbin,
'In Search of Schodinger's Cat, **1984**

'Returning to your books, I should like you to read the next four pages and write down in your jotters what you consider to be the chief causes of the Franco-Prussian war.'

Ian Chesterton sighed, and turned to his textbook, as Mr. Holt had requested. He was bored with School Certificate history, and longed for the Sixth Form when he could specialise. The problem with history was that it had already happened, he contemplated. What was the excitement in studying decisions that had already been made, and problems that had already been solved? The atomic bomb that had ended the war just a few years ago showed Ian just how quickly new advances were taking place and he wanted to be part of that. That night at home, he told his parents that he had decided to specialise in science next year, and maybe even try and get a scholarship to university.

The lighting in the Mess Hall was a dull yellow, made yellower still by the smoke emanating from the dozens of untipped cigarettes being relished by young privates enjoying one of the near-universal comforts of National Service. Conscription had continued for years after the war, and Ian had received his call-up papers a few months before he was due to go up to university, cruelly frustrating his insatiable will to learn. His Father had been delighted - 'It'll make a man of you son. And Imperial College will still be there when you get out.'

Mikey Dunlop passed Ian his packet of Woodbines. 'You know I don't,' said Ian, who was saving his pay in the knowledge that rooms in London would be expensive. 'What are you going to do when you get out?' he asked his personable, if unchallenging comrade.

'Dunno. Join me Dad's joinery firm, 'spose. He's already taught me all he knows so I'll get me City and Guilds in no time. What about you Ian? Still off to college?'

'Oh yes - and then, who knows?' Ian had planned to maybe join the aerospace industry, but his time billeted here on the East Coast had reminded him just how much he enjoyed the company of ordinary people.

Mikey Dunlop passed Ian his packet of Woodbines. 'I'll owe you, ' laughed Ian, who had been the last of the non-smokers in his company to succumb. 'What are you going to do when you get out?' he asked his comrade, Inhaling deeply.

'Dunno, join me Dad's joinery firm, 'spose. He's alredy taught me all he knows so I'll get me City and Guilds in no time. What about you Ian? Still off to college?'

'I can't think what else I'll do.' Electronics was Ian's ultimate ambition, and he had considered signing on for a full commission In the Signal Corps. But he'd learn more at University, and have the pick of the jobs later.

Looking around the tiny office he shared with three other circuit designers at West London Control Systems, Ian began to wish he had enrolled at Teacher Training College after graduating from Imperial. His work had initially been Interesting, but It seemed that all the British Rocket Group wanted from Its suppliers had been the same systems, but made ever more dependable. Pointlessly refining the same circuits day after day in the company of the *same few people had dulled Ian's problem-solving ability, and he wished his efforts could be seen to have an effect on real people in the real world. There were rumours of a British Mars Probe, but that was years ahead, and there was no guarantee that WLCS would be one of the government's chosen contractors. Ian sighed and lit another cigarette.*

The bell rang to signal the end of the lesson and Ian had to shout above the hubbub of teenage voices. 'Homework to me by Friday, please, and no excuses!'

Left alone in the Coal Hill School's prestigious new General Science Lab, Ian left a note for the technician and, picking up his briefcase, ventured out into the corridor.

'Settling in then?' he enquired of the handsome young woman in a cardigan, slowly examining the notice board.

'Oh yes!' she beamed in reply. Ian and Miss Wright (the name she carried beyond the staff room had caused him an initial wry amusement) had become allies soon after her arrival that autumn term at Coal Hill, and he had taken her under his wing, often giving her a lift home in his Austin Farina.

'Has history advanced yet this term?' he gently teased her - 'any new developments to put in your lessons?'

'Don't be mean! Anyway, even if there were a hundred new inventions or discoveries tomorrow, it would be years before the London Board put them on your science syllabus.'

'But there will be a hundred new discoveries tomorrow!' sparkled Ian. 'Right here in this very building! Not new ones, I'll grant you, and I suppose there may only be a few dozen of them in class 3B, but at least *they're* learning something for the first time.'

They both smiled.

'So it can't overload!' exclaimed David Norrie triumphantly. There was a weary round of applause from his colleagues, as they scrutinised his engineering drawing on the wall for weaknesses. Ian grudgingly admitted that Norris' latest refinement to WLCS's already-dependable fuel-cut-off element had a little more elegance than earlier versions, and did indeed appear to be failure-proof. How had he failed to see it himself? Reluctantly, he internally admitted that he hadn't really been looking. With no prospect of promotion, and few new products on the drawing-board Ian resolved that it was time to spread his wings.

'And that's why the change only occurs when we introduce the catalyst.' With real relief, Ian saw the clouds of doubt clear from Billy Govan's young freckled face. 'Does that make sense now Mr. Govan?' Ian called all his boys 'Mr.' and all his girls by their first names. It seemed to make him more approachable and the senior staff didn't seem to mind.

'Yes sir. Sorry sir,' mumbled Govan.

'Oh don't apologise for asking questions,' offered Ian, embarrassing the boy still further. 'It's only real idiots who never ask questions.'

There was a ripple of laughter at this implicit criticism of some of class 5C's more taciturn students, and then a hand was raised.

'Sir? Is it really true that there are things even smaller that electrons?'

'I see your father takes *The Times,'* replied Ian too quickly, causing Jennifer Seaton, already bullied for her airs and graces, to blush. There had been a piece yesterday by the paper's science correspondent, which discussed recent theoretical physics advances and the purported existence of subatomic particles. 'Yes Jennifer - there are. But we need not concern ourselves with them here at Coal Hill. Well, not for a few years yet, anyway. Now, to get back to the demonstration, how do you think we could reverse the reaction?'

Leaving his car in the visitor's area of the car park, *Ian walked across to the reception area at the foot of the new multi-story building which dwarfed the goods yard and the remainder of the emerging 1960s industrial landscape.*

'Ian Chesterton,' he confidently announced to the receptionist, who matched his false confidence by beaming 'Oh yes, to see Mr. Collins. Could you put this on, and take a seat please?' She handed him a visitor's pass, which impossibly seemed to bear a portrait of him taken that day. (As he walked across the car park perhaps?) Beside it was the company trademark of International Electromatics.

Collins appeared almost immediately, a serious, thickset man, who led Ian straight to a modern office. They spoke in depth about Ian's experience of resilient, failsafe control systems. Collins would only hint at IE's interest in this area, although he seemed utterly confident in the company's future. Ian had only vaguely heard of IE when he had responded to the advertisement in the London Evening Standard, but was impressed with the number of household name companies to which they were suppliers. The interview ended conclusively, although as Ian drove home, he felt encouraged by Collins' almost unhealthy interest in his recent specialisation.

'Oh it's one of the girls. Susan Foreman.'

Ian's eyes widened. 'Susan Foreman! You find her a problem too, do you?'

'I most certainly do!'

'And you don't know what to make of her?'

Barbara shook her head.

Before breakfast, I'd torn my best sports jacket on a loose screw on the door of my room. It didn't help that I'd put off tightening it for weeks so I had nobody to blame but myself. Then later, after I'd driven all the way to Reigate for a job I was after as Assistant Research scientist at Donneby's, the big rocket component firm, I found that a nephew of one of the directors had got the post and I'd made the journey for nothing. Now, the fog, and the prospects of a long weary walk.

As Ian's car turned slowly into Totter's Lane, Barbara said, 'Park just over there Ian. We'll have a good view of the gates, without being too close. We don't want her to see us.'

There was a pause of a second or two and then I laid the handkerchief on her forehead. 'Rest quietly for a minute. You'll be alright. '

'Susan...'

'Yes, I know. You started to tell me your name before - '

She shook her head and I rescued the

handkerchief and started to refold it. 'No, Susan is on the road, ' she said, 'she was in the car with me. '

Surely it wasn't like that. I had known Barbara for months. Barbara? Where *am* I? Doctor?

The dark shape came nearer, and revealed itself as a white-haired old man wrapped in some kind of cloak. He wore an oddly-shaped fur hat, and a long striped scarf was wound around his neck. The old man paused for a moment, coughing as old people do, and patted himself on the chest. He seemed to be muttering... He went up to the Police Box, fished a key from out of his pocket and opened the door.

But I did work at WLCS. And at Coal Hill. But at the same time. Two jobs. No. I need a cigarette. But I don't smoke. Where am I?

In the silence I offered her a cigarette. She refused and I lit one for myself. In the glow of the lighter flame I saw the tears on her cheeks. The dim outline of a man became clearer.

He was wearing a cloak and under his fur hat I could see his silver hair, surprisingly very long on the back of his neck, and touching the collar of his cloak. His head was bent down, peering at the ground and in his hand he held a match.

What is happening? Where am I? Who am I? WHO AM I? WHO WAS I?

Despite his age, the old man was amazingly strong, and he almost succeeded in throwing Ian off. Barbara came and joined in, and somehow, struggling wildly, Ian and Barbara stumbled into the police box - and straight into impossibility.

I raced over to the box and ran through the doors. The light closed around me and I screwed my eyes up in agony and threw my hands up to my face. Almost at once I tripped over something and fell headlong, hitting my head with a sickening crash on the floor.

'I thought you'd never wake up[1] she said, smiling with relief.

Ian tried to reply, but his mouth was dry and he made do with returning her smile. Gradually he took notice of his surroundings. A rough plain, with little to distinguish it, stretched in all directions, illuminated by two dim suns hanging motionless in a cloudless sky. They might as well be sitting before a painted theatre cyclorama. He sat up and saw theTARDIS, looking surreally familiar and comforting a few yards away. What a contrast to his first reaction to the Doctor's mysterious vessel, over a year ago, in Totter's Lane. Or was it? The memory of entering the ship on Barnes Common seemed almost as strong and had a vivid detail, even more real than a dream remembered on waking.

The ship's owner and his young ward, Vicki, appeared from the edge of his vision.

'And about time too, young man. We couldn't have you napping all day while the rest of us were ready to explore. Vicki, fetch the bandages from the ship. Chesterton has a nasty-looking bump on his head.'

Ian raised his hand to his forehead and winced as he verified the old man's observation. 'How did I...' he began to ask. Had he been attacked?

'You should watch where you put those feet of yours,' advised the Doctor, raising his eyebrows in mock admonition and gesturing wordlessly at the smooth multicoloured pebbles that littered the plain.

Ian blushed as he realised he must have tripped up. 'Where are we Doctor?'

'The planet Tyron, my boy, in the Seventeenth Galaxy, if the Astral Map is to be believed, and I see no reason why it shouldn't be, hmmm?' His eyes narrowed as he looked around. 'There is no life here, of any kind, nor plants animals, or even bacteria, as far as I can determine, yet I should say, yes, that there is some kind of presence. I sensed it as we left the ship, just before you took your tumble.'

Vicki emerged from the ship, bearing a striped head bandage of an ingenious design, familiar to Ian from when he and the Doctor had not enjoyed such a good-natured verbal sparring rapport. Barbara gently applied it to Ian's bruised cranium, and he stood up, facing the Doctor squarely.

'A presence? What do you mean?' he demanded.

'It was the ship, at first, yes the ship. There was a communication, almost an empathy as soon as we landed. And don't any of you feel that there is an intelligence here, that we are not alone, hmm?'

'Yes', offered Barbara, 'ever since we arrived I've had the feeling we're with someone else. But that's ridiculous. There's nothing here.'

Ian was confident enough to share his experiences now. 'When I woke up I thought I had just been having a stupid dream. But if I

> think about it, there was a pattern. I was remembering my whole life. You know, the way they say it flashes before you at the end. But there were two lives. I remember being a teacher at Coal Hill, with you Barbara.' He refrained from mentioning Susan, knowing that the Doctor still found memories of his granddaughter unwelcome. 'But I also remember being an engineer, in rocket control systems. At the same time. Even you Doctor, you were different in both my lives. They can't possibly both have happened.'

'They did.' The voice seemed to be coming from inside Ian's head.

'Did you hear that?' he asked the others, but from the looks of puzzlement on Barbara and Vicki's faces and excitement on the Doctor's, he knew his question had been unnecessary. The voice, itself a curiously shifting mixture of many timbres, continued.

'You all have an infinite number of futures. And an infinite number of past lives. Only we have a fixed perspective and can see the possible branches that are cut off from you.'

The Doctor grasped his lapel and spoke out as if addressing an auditorium. 'And you? Who are you that would address us out of the air?'

'We are at your feet. We are all around you. We are the stones of Tyron.' With that, the voices went silent.

Ian was first to voice his disbelief. 'The stones? These? But Doctor, that's ridiculous. They're inanimate. Dead, never even alive. We've seen some pretty unbelievable creatures on our travels with you Doctor, but they all moved and breathed. How can a solid unmoving rock be intelligent?'

There was a twinkle in the old man's eyes as he feverishly postulated, muttering 'Yes, yes,' to himself. He snapped his fingers and turned to face Ian. 'Come come, my boy. Even in your time you had the transistor, solid-state electronics, hmm?'

Ian spluttered. 'Are you suggesting these stones are some kind of electrical creatures?'

'More than that, my boy; they operate on a level below the electron. How do you think they were able to see into your other self?'

'Quantum computers, Doctor?' piped up Vicki.

'Quite so, my child, I should certainly think so. It's fascinating, yes, fascinating.'

'I'm sorry,' interjected Barbara apologetically, 'but for the benefit of those of us from 1963, would you mind explaining?'

Ian smiled. The request would be received far more cordially from Barbara than himself.

'Life can find many forms, my boy. Even where there is no water, no wind, no movement, no time even to speak of, life can exist. All life needs is a medium that can change. The life of these stones is hidden below the level of the atom, even the electron. It exists in the quantum domain, the microscopic random difference between what will be and what might be. Yes! Rather than you or I might think by the tiny reaction in our brains, these stones stay perfectly still at the atomic level, but oscillate at the quantum level.'

Ian hazarded a question. 'And that's how they were able to relive my other life?'

The old man shook with mirth. 'Chesterton, I haven't the faintest idea. I don't know everything.' Laughing still at his private joke, the Doctor led his friends back to the TARDIS. 'Hurry up all of you. We're already in the next Universe but one.'

A Tapestry of Shadows

By

Alan Taylor

January 4th. The date on which Liz Shaw was appointed to the newly created position of Chair of Paraphysics at the University of Cambridge. The ceremony was a small one, held in a ceremony held in Clare Chapel, attended by a select few wrinkled professors of Applied Maths and Theoretical Physics and the remainder of the Paraphysics Faculty. The remainder of the Paraphysics Faculty being an American Post grad called Ben Hawkins.

January 5th. The date on which Liz Shaw woke after too many gins in the Mitre, reached across the bed and was surprised to find it empty. A reassuring warmth remained, though, and the smell of fresh coffee wafted from the kitchen.

'Ben?'

Ben appeared in the doorway in his nightshirt, a mug in each hand. 'Hello, sleepyhead.'

She tried to throw a pillow at him, but it fell short. She half fell out of the bed trying to rescue it, and lay there looking at his hairy ankles for a while.

'Ngggghhh,' she said.

Ten minutes later, they were sitting in the kitchen, eating toast.

Liz didn't have the energy to shower. Instead, she had pulled her hair back, tying it in a tight ponytail. She didn't need the hassle of it hanging free.

Ben, annoyingly, looked fantastic. She looked for a flaw, and was pleased to find the beginnings of a spot on his neck. Served him right for being so perfect.

Ben fingered the collar of his shirt, in the way that he knew really annoyed her. He couldn't help himself though. He was nervous. He should give her a chance to get over her hangover before he told her. She was going to hit the roof.

When the elevator doors opened in the lobby of the Ritz Carlton hotel, Manhattan, an elegant blonde woman in a red dress strode confidently out. Several heads turned to look at her, and she smiled wryly, relishing the attention. She often told people that Attention was her middle name. Of course, her middle name was actually Cloris, after the American actress, but she didn't tell people that. Ffyona Cloris Bendix didn't have quite the ring to it that she hoped for. And she thought it sounded a bit rude.

'If you can't confuse them, convince them,' she muttered to herself. A useful motto, she felt. Not entirely appropriate on a cold day in February, but not bad given that somewhere on the other side of the world she was cuddled up next to smelly teddy, dreaming about Play School.

She needed a drink, and she didn't have a penny on her. Money always seemed so presumptuous, and she couldn't find a handbag that didn't ruin the line of her dress. So she made her way into the bar, sat next to the richest looking man she could find (pinstripe suit, widest waist in the place) and went for the surreal opening gambit.

'Hi, you probably don't know me, but I'm the dancing baby from Ally McBeal. Yes, I know it's not on Broadway, so you probably haven't heard of it, but trust me; it's going to be big. In the mean time, think 'struggling actress' and you'll probably get the right idea.'

He harrumphed, which she took as a good sign, and she waved at the waiter in a way that she hoped said 'get me a champagne cocktail, a bowl of nuts and put it on Bozo's account.'

Of course, by the time they left the bar, she had got herself a new job, a studio apartment and an expense account at Bloomingdale's. She'd regret it within a month or

two.

Liz stood at the station for ten minutes after his train left, watching the track vanishing into the horizon, as though wishing it could turn back time.

The sod. The good-for nothing, sneaky, self-serving colonial sod. It didn't make her feel any better, thinking of him that way. The fact was she envied him. She envied the fact that he had followed his dreams - back to the States, to Harvard, and his own research projects.

It was just... just that she was going to miss him; that was all.

She was glad she couldn't go with him to London, couldn't wave him off at the airport. Part of her ached for the chance, of course. But then she pictured herself, waving a handkerchief she didn't own, runny mascara giving her panda eyes. She didn't want to think of herself like that, far less to have Ben see her that way.

There had been a phone call, apparently, from a Miss Florimel di Principessa, an Italian lady who wished to meet Liz to discuss a possible sponsorship arrangement. When Liz had told Ben about it, he'd pointed out that it was too good an opportunity to let slip - the department was seriously underfunded - and if it meant that she couldn't go with him to the airport, then it was obviously not meant to be. She'd kissed him gently on the nose then, rolled over and offered a silent prayer of thanks to Florimel di Principessa, saviour of mortals, rescuer from emotional turmoil.

She left the station, stuffing her platform ticket into a pocket, and grabbed a taxi back to her lab on Castle Hill. Annoyingly, Florimel di Principessa was already waiting for Liz in her office.

She had moved some of the furniture around so that she could stand in just the right position; the sun was behind her head, shining through her carefully permed halo of hair, a shimmer of gold around the deep copper. She wore a simple long green jacket and mini skirt, with a low-cut white embroidered blouse. Her white leather boots stopped just over her knee, and a matching wide brimmed hat and a handbag sat on the dresser. She turned to face Liz as she arrived, reaching out her hand and smiling beatifically.

'Professor Shaw,' she said, her voice soft, her accent west coast American.

'Miss di Principessa.' Liz tried to hide her dissatisfaction that this woman had let herself into the office and rearranged the furniture. Think of the money, she told herself.

'Please, call me Flora, all my friends do.' She smiled broadly.

Liz waved her to a chair, and Flora sat, crossing her legs carefully, exposing a sliver too much thigh. Liz took her own seat, behind her desk. The desk was flimsy wood, and not big enough for Liz, but provided a suitable barrier between her and her visitor.

'So, what can I do for you, Flora?'

'Good question, Professor Shaw. That is such a good question.'

Immediately, Liz felt that Flora was hiding something.

'You wish to make a bequest to the Paraphysics Faculty?' she prompted.

'Good heavens, no,' said Flora, smiling again. 'That was merely to get your attention, a ruse if you will. I'm here for a far more personal reason.'

Liz stood up, placing her hands flat on the desk.

'In that case, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave,[1] she said. 'I'm rather busy, and if you don't have any funding to offer me, I think we'd both be better off not wasting time.'

Flora shrugged. 'Before I go, could you autograph these for me?'

She reached into her handbag, and pulled out some documents. Liz's old papers. The unpublished, classified ones. *'Artificial Intelligence in Pseudo-Plastics*', *'Evolution of Homo Reptilis',* and *'The What-If Scenario; Multiple Hypotheses for a Multi-layered Cosmos'.* The papers she had written based on her time at the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce, when she had worked with the Doctor.

Liz stared. When she spoke, it was slowly, intensely, her eyes fixed on Flora. 'Where did you get these?'

Flora laughed, softly.

'Oh, you know how it is, Professor Shaw. If you need help, you recruit the best. I think you're quite possibly the only person on this Earth who can help me, and so I have a proposition for you. Come and help me with my problem, and I can arrange as much funding as you need. Independently of the

University, if you like. So that you can research your pseudo-plastics and your reptile men and your alternate universes.'

Liz sat again.

'What's the catch?'

'No catch, Professor Shaw. You come and do a job for me, I set you up for life.'

'You haven't actually told me what it is that you want me to do.'

That was the first and only time Liz ever saw Flora squirm.

'It's difficult to describe,' she said. 'Because I don't really know what it is that I want you to do myself.'

'Without that information, Miss di Principessa, I'm afraid that I...'

'Why don't you come over to New York, and I can show you. No obligation. Take a vacation, a holiday. Come over, see my problem, then decide.'

Liz turned to look out of the window, then. She looked up at the sky, thinking about Ben somewhere high over the Atlantic. She informed herself politely that she wasn't going chasing after him, then she made up her mind.

'Very well.'

Whenever Ffyona heard 'Making Whoopee' in a piano bar she had to fight the urge to rip off her boots, climb on top of the piano and writhe furiously.

This time, she had other things on her mind, so the urge was not that great, but it was undeniably there.

She was doing what she did best, arguably - flirting.

Her selected victim was the son of an American diplomat. Clean-cut all- American type, probably played quarterback and dated the prom queen. He seemed to be responding to her small talk, so she had ruled out the possibility that he wasn't interested in the fairer sex. All she had to do was to find his weakness, exploit it, get herself invited to the right sort of party, jump ship from this guy, pick up someone richer and get herself on the first flight back home. She couldn't wait for Concorde.

She'd progressed mechanically through the initial phases; the accidental twisting of the ankle, grabbing his knee as she fell; the hobble over to the corner table; letting him buy her a drink; the grateful English rose, all lost and flustered in the big city. She had introduced herself as Anthea Turner and was about to go into her whole Tracey Island routine, when the pianist struck up 'Making Whoopee'.

'This may sound humungously rash and flirtatious,' she said, 'but would you care to dance?'

He didn't resist, and didn't comment on how greatly improved her ankle seemed as she led him to the dance floor. He moved very well, although he had really bad hair, she noticed - then remembered that she was living in primitive times. Her choice, too, she reminded herself. Still, not for much longer. Hopefully.

'Have you seen Grease?' she asked, as they danced, slowly, his arm around her waist, easing gradually downwards.

'The musical? No - I'm only just back in town.'

She tried to look like Olivia Newton John for a second, all virginal. She could tell he wasn't convinced.

'Can I get you another drink?' he asked, as the song ended.

'I could be persuaded,' she said. 'But not here. Too stuffy and formal.'

He suggested her suite, and she made a dutiful show of pretending to think twice. It wasn't until he started groping her in the lift that she realised that she hadn't asked for his name.

She asked him later, after he had offered to take her to some ambassador's party. 'Ben, Ben Hawkins,' he said, just before he fell asleep.

'Typical man,' she muttered, and started playing Tetris on her Game Boy.

Flora was waiting for her at the airport.

Liz had never been to America before, and was unsure of what to expect. She hadn't really expected it to feel any different from London. But it did. Somehow, tangibly, America felt less real than England. The sight of Flora in a flowing bottle green dress did little to shake that illusion. Flora was wearing an ankle chain; Liz had never seen one before. She took a deep breath, pulling her suitcase behind her through the arrival gate. Welcome to the New World.

'Darling!' cried Flora - an artificial welcome if ever Liz had heard one. 'Let my man carry your bags to the limo for you!' She stood aside to let a black-suited figure with close-cropped hair and dark glasses pick up Liz's case. 'And then you can tell me how ghastly the airline food was.'

They drove for over an hour, eventually coming to a halt in front of a tall brown stone building, in a district full of tall brown stone buildings. As far as Liz could tell, they were away from main roads - a quiet, suburban cul-de-sac. The traffic was little more than a background hum.

'Welcome to my home,' said Flora, as she made her way up the steps to the front door, fumbling in her bag for her keys. 'Not as big as the place in San Francisco, and the view isn't as good, but we don't dare move the Subject.'

'The Subject?' Liz was suddenly interested. She had been exhausted by the journey, and had found herself almost dropping off several times in the car, despite Flora's attempts to play the hostess and the continual stream of small talk. Liz didn't really care where Staten Island was. She wanted to find out why she was in New York. And she wanted to see Ben. He was here somewhere, apparently, staying with his parents before he headed off to New England.

This was the first time Flora had mentioned 'the Subject'.

'Mind my babies,' said Flora, throwing open the door, and stepping inside. Two mastiffs bounded down the stairs to greet her, one lavishing her with slobbering attention and affection while the other sniffed at Liz with suspicion.

'Let them get to know you a little and they won't bite. Why don't you grab a shower, then we can go and show you what you’re up against.'

'Thank you, Flora,' said Liz. The dog seemed quite sweet in its own way, even if it did seem to have too many teeth for its mouth and an inability to stop itself from drooling.

An hour later, in the basement of another building, Liz met the Subject for the first time.

He was lying on a hospital gurney, with a saline drip in his arm. From the doorway, Liz didn't see what all the fuss was about. Still, she knew better than to judge by appearances.

He looked peaceful, lying there. She walked around him slowly, not touching him, just taking in the details, while Flora watched from a distance.

- grey hair, a high, imperious forehead - eyes closed, no way to tell what colour they are - a roman nose, like a beak - little colour in his lips - a grey flannel suit, three buttons, velvet collar, frills on his shirt cuffs - brown patent leather shoes - black socks, no brown to match his shoes - his trousers just too tight, his thighs straining at the fabric - a velvet trim around the edge of his jacket, one of the pockets slightly torn - a double chin - wide, full lips, a small nose, dark hair flopping forward over his face -

Liz looked up at Flora.

Flora looked back at Liz. 'Can you see why I need you, Liz?'

Liz nodded. She was possibly the only person on the planet who knew what was going on here. She looked down at the subject again, his long blond hair tucked into the collar of his Hawaiian shirt.

'How long has he been like this?' she asked.

'Since we found him. At least a year.'

Liz placed a hand on the Subject's arm, feeling the musculature shift beneath her fingers. A state of constant regeneration.

'Doctor,' she said to the Subject, quietly so Flora could not hear. 'Is that you?'

The ambassador's parties were known, among other things, for the sheer tedium of the ambassador's conversation. Ffyona Bendix was known, among other things, for the fact that she looked stunning in black and made the most of it. Rarely were the two found together, so that particular Saturday night was particularly blessed.

'Of course, the early years were the best, but when they revamped it, I do feel it regained some of its lost charm...' Small talk. She hated it. But the Spanish Ambassador had a peppercorn between his front teeth, and the only things she could think of to talk about were children's television programmes and luxury chocolates. Ben was off somewhere talking to minor royalty.

'A refreshment, madam?'

Ffyona wrinkled her nose at the waitress, a tall, slim South American woman with bleached blonde hair, carrying a tray piled high with small round chocolates. 'Choccy footballs?' asked Ffyona. 'How simply whizzo. Not quite what I expected but then...' She recognised the waitress.

'Tasmin?' she hissed under her breath.

'You were expecting Bugs Bunny? Powder

room, five minutes. Be there.'

Ffyona plucked a chocolate football from near the bottom of the pile and swallowed it in a single gulp.

'Of course,' she said to the ambassador. 'The real issue that people should be concentrating on is that some countries in Asia are still showing 'The Wonder Years'. Now what do you propose to do about that?' She smiled, and passed him her champagne glass. 'Back in a mo, sweets.'

Tasmin was waiting for Ffyona in the mock-rococo powder room. Ffyona perched on the corner of the commode, pulled a stick of gum out of her garter and started chewing.

'This had better be good, Tasmin,' she said. 'I've got a date later, and the Spanish Ambassador is drooling out there, ready to lend me a yacht for a month in exchange for airy fairy promises, a sexy pout and a dirty limerick. How can I help the CIA today?'

It occurred to Ffyona from time to time that she knew two bodies calling themselves the CIA, and she had no idea which one Tasmin worked for. It didn't really matter. She was stitched up either way.

Tasmin kept it brief and unemotional. There was a jewel in a safety deposit box in such and such a bank, on such and such a street and so on and so forth, these were the security arrangements. The usual deal. Ffyona took it all in. It all seemed pretty straightforward, and she wondered idly if Tasmin knew about the little smear of chocolate on her lips.

'You can do it?' she asked.

'Well, of course I can do it, Tasmin. The question is why you need me to do it. But yes, I know, I ask no questions, I don't need security clearance, you guys don't take me to your labs and do experiments on me, or whatever it is you guys are itching to do to me.'

'This time, Ffyona,' said Tasmin, 'it's really important. Don't come back without the jewel.' She paused then, added 'please', and shook Ffyona's hand for slightly longer than usual.

Ffyona winced. Something had freaked Tasmin - and nothing ever freaked Tasmin. Tasmin never said 'please'.

After two weeks with the Subject, Liz was frustrated. Frustrated with New York, frustrated with the fact that Ben wasn't returning her calls, frustrated with Flora's small talk and frustrated at her complete lack of progress.

She had analysed his blood, his tissues, his urine and had even carried out a rudimentary DNA analysis. Twice. With different results each time, which didn't really surprise her, but which she still found frustrating. He wasn't human, that was for sure, although she wasn't quite sure what she was. He could be a Time Lord - he could even

be the Doctor for all she knew. Or not.

Flora knew more than she was letting on, that was for sure. She wouldn't tell Liz anything about the history of the Subject, and just simply clammed up every time she tried to steer the conversation in that direction. She would chat merrily about the weather, or politics, and she took a keen interest in Liz's work, but there were so many more questions Liz wanted to answer. Like why she was interested in the Subject in the first place. Little things.

Flora was an excellent hostess, Liz couldn't fault her there. High Table at Cambridge paled into insignificance compared to some of Flora's dinners, and Liz had developed quite a taste for bagels. The house was stunning and the dogs were quite affectionate once you got to know them.

Flora herself was a creature of habit. She rose early, dressed - invariably in green - and took the dogs for a walk. Her breakfast was coffee and orange juice, then she accompanied Liz to the lab. She was back at the house before Liz got home, usually preparing dinner. Flora entertained every night; bankers, stockbrokers, artists. She seemed to enjoy surrounding herself with attractive, wealthy men. After dessert, Liz would make an excuse and leave; either for a stroll, or for an early night. Flora and her friends would sit laughing and drinking until the early morning.

The routine only changed once. The telephone rang during dessert, and Flora took the call in the hall. It was clear that she was trying not to be overheard, and Liz struggled to tune out the pro footballer and the gynaecologist to focus on her hostess.

'...are you sure? ...I never even considered it might be around here at all. Do you think it's related somehow? ...God, that's a thought. We might be the only ones trapped here, everyone else free to come and go as they please. ...Well, obviously he has to be the first concern. ...Let me know as soon as you...'

After dinner, Flora asked her friends to leave; they looked disappointed, but went quietly. Liz too made her excuses, heading upstairs with a copy of 'The Man in the Iron Mask'.

She finished reading about one - completely oblivious of the events of the book, thinking about what Flora had said on the phone. Wondering what 'it' was. Suspecting that 'he' was the Subject. Pondering what was going on.

Yawning, she admitted defeat, and decided to return the book to the shelves in Flora's study and to grab a mug of warm milk from the kitchen, to help her sleep.

She made her way downstairs, and paused at the study door. It was slightly ajar, and through the gap, Liz could make out Flora, sitting at the desk, playing cards, deep in concentration. One more mystery to juggle.

She decided to call the gargoyle Gary because she'd been sitting next to him on the corner of Saint Modan's for half an hour and for most of that she had her arm around him. Somehow it seemed rude to do that without being on first name terms.

'Pleased to meet you, Gary. I'm Ffyona,' she said, but Gary didn't respond.

Just her luck - the strong, silent type. She pouted, snapped her infrared Binocs back down over her eyes and zoomed in on the bank again. She was still in her little black dress, a pair of loose fatigues pulled on hastily, and her high heels had been traded for a pair of sensible DMs. Ready for a night on the tiles.

The bank stood alone across the street, bordered by main roads on two sides and narrow alleys on the others. There were three guards outside. Two circled the building at roughly ten minute intervals, while the third sat in a hut by the door, sleeping. He probably had a dog with him, although she couldn't tell for sure without moving. It didn't really matter to her, because if things went as planned, she would be in and out without the guards breaking their stride.

Panning up, she found her target. Hidden behind the decorative balustrade that ran the length of the roof, she caught the top right corner of a wooden door. If Tasmin was to be believed - and she usually was - then that was Ffyona's prime point of entry.

She slipped off the Binocs, wishing that her hair was shorter, and pulled on her balaclava. She was reaching behind her for the grapple gun when she caught a snatch of movement.

Someone less observant would have dismissed it as a trick of the light, or a gust of wind. The night was still though. There was somebody on the roof of the bank.

Binocs back, zoom and focus. Got him.

A figure emerged from behind the balustrade - medium height, slim, dressed in black trousers and sweater, a cloth hat pulled over his hair. She put him in his mid thirties. Clean shaven. He turned to look straight at her, and nodded. Ffyona shook her head in disbelief - there was no way he could have seen her from that distance, but it was a nice touch, she thought. Disconcerting.

As he made his way around the corner of the roof, she noticed a few more details - a tuft of ginger hair poking out from under his hat, his bright green socks, and - a glint of red on a chain around his neck. She was half expecting it, of course. He had already been in to the museum; he had already stolen the jewel.

She swore then - one of the less salubrious habits she picked up at Roedean - and threw herself over the side of the church, whispering farewell to Gary. It took her about ten seconds to abseil to the ground, and maybe the same again to deactivate the remote grappler, retrieve the rope and stash it. By the time she made it out to the street, the thief was there too.

He was walking out of the alleyway by the museum, cool and calm, superiority written all over him. He had taken off his hat and sweater and lost them somewhere. Flame red hair and a green shirt that matched his socks. Carrying a briefcase, and walking with his head high he looked suave, self-assured. Like a businessman rather than a jewel thief.

For a second she thought about giving up and heading home, but then she remembered Tasmin's handshake, that 'please'. This was serious. She didn't really have any option but to follow him. She needed to get that jewel.

She didn't have anything resembling a plan left, and she hated that. A good job was always well planned, swiftly executed, with every contingency covered. She'd had less than an hour to plan this one, and then, to cap it all, some swine had beaten her to the prize.

She didn't have far to follow him - two blocks only, to the building that had been the Alhambra theatre, and would be again before the end of the century. Al's Cinema. Somehow, Ffyona didn't think that *'Sailor Studs in Siam 3'* was her kind of movie.

The new tactic was risky - Liz would be the first to admit that. But she was finding herself short of patience with the Subject, increasingly uncomfortable living with Flora, and longing to find Ben. She could only think of one more thing to do. She was going to try to resuscitate the Subject and ask him what was wrong with him.

She had set up a makeshift office in the corner of the basement - a desk, a lamp, and a small bookcase full of medical texts, theoretical physics papers and some well thumbed Lovecraft paperbacks.

The book that looked the most read was Flora's copy of Liz's *'The What-if Scenario; Multiple Hypotheses for a Multi-layered Cosmos'.* Liz knew the paper with a painful clarity. She had written it over the summer after she left UNIT; two months of early mornings, cold showers and long days spent in the company of her blackboard and her typewriter.

The problem had been making it sound plausible and not like science fiction. She had ended up presenting the whole concept as theoretical, stemming from the almost cliched hypothesis that there were an infinite multitude of universes, each only a small change away from the last. There is a universe where you had bacon for breakfast this morning instead of egg. In another universe you skipped breakfast entirely. In another you were never born.

From this hypothesis, she had built up logically towards some of the science the Doctor had used to travel - albeit unintentionally - into a parallel universe. She hadn't provided all of the information, of course. That would have been dangerous. Just enough for the paper to be classified before it was even published. And all her work was theoretical. Hypothetical particles, parallel tunnels linking one universe to the next, the flaws in the Einstein-Rosen bridge metaphor, nothing with any practical application.

Liz picked up the paper and thumbed through it. The pages were yellowed at the edges, and there was a coffee stain on page thirteen, where she had discussed possible ways of stabilising the ends of a parallel tunnel.

Liz read page thirteen. Then she looked at the Subject, watching his beard change from a black goatee to ginger tufts before it vanished altogether.

Then she read page thirteen again.

Ffyona stood on the street corner, watching her jewel thief as he stood nonchalantly reading the posters outside the cinema. He knew she was behind him, she was sure, but he had made no effort to lose her. That worried her slightly - it was a sign of extreme self confidence on his part, which either meant that he was inappropriately arrogant, or that he knew something she didn't. Whatever the reason, she couldn't afford to let him out of her sight.

She was so engrossed in her quarry that she was oblivious to her surroundings, and in particular to the young man who had walked out of the cinema, crossed the road and spoken to her.

He cleared his throat again, and she turned.

He was no more than sixteen, slightly

chubby around the face, with one of the worst haircuts she had seen since the Beatles. He wore a heavy overcoat over a pale yellow shirt, and he was about six inches shorter than she was. Instantly she labelled him 'dirty young man'.

'I asked how much?' English public school accent.

Ffyona was confused for a moment.

'Do I look like a...' Then she realised that she was standing under a street lamp with a disinterested attitude in a seedy part of New York and decided that she probably did look like one.

'Piss off, kid.'

Dirty Young Man shrugged and shuffled away along the pavement. Ffyona turned back to the cinema just in time to see her prey heading inside. She swore, and made her way around the building, scouting for another entrance. Better safe than sorry, she reckoned, and she needed to be sure that she didn't let her own arrogance lead her straight into a trap.

This guy impressed her. There was something about the way he moved, the precision with which he had executed his departure from the museum - something about him that hissed at her that he was very good at what he did, very efficient, very dangerous. She liked that.

She found a cast-iron staircase bolted to the back of the building, sealed off by barbed wire. It snaked up ten or twelve feet to an open doorway. Perfect. She pulled her wire cutters out of her handbag and set to work.

Ten minutes later she was standing behind the screen of the cinema, deep in thought and listening to the sounds of Siam.

The Doctor would not have been impressed. She had never seen one before, yet she had blithely walked in to the lab, looked at the Subject and presumed that it was a defective regeneration. 'Where's your scientific method, Liz?' he would have said.

And even if it had been a regeneration, why would Flora have come to her? In fact why would Flora have had to come to anyone?

The answer lay on page thirteen.

Because Flora knew this man, knew that the Subject was trapped in an unstable parallel tunnel, and that he was changing from one possible version of himself to another. And in her paper, Liz had claimed to know how to stabilise it.

Of course, that was all theoretical. In practice, she didn't have a clue.

Ffyona remembered her training. All theoretical, of course, and all completely useless. You can hardly conduct a top down search of an adult cinema when you're a woman drowning in a sea of raging hormones. She tried to block out the sound of the movie and concentrate on the task in hand.

The CIA wanted the jewel, and so did the man who stole it. He was confident enough to let her follow him - possibly even wanted her to. Which meant that either he wanted to trap her or seduce her. The odds were pretty even. There were still too many unknowns.

What she needed was more information. She could almost hear a voice in her head saying 'you won't get any,' but she dismissed it.

Then her thief walked down the stairs and straight past where she was hidden. He was arm in arm with an overly made-up woman with copper hair. They reached a door in the far corner of the backstage area, and as the woman unlocked it, the thief turned, looked straight at her, and waved. Ffyona stuck her tongue out at him. The Doctor, she thought as they opened the door and headed down into the basement, would not have been impressed.

Particularly not when she picked the lock and followed them.

'Liz!'

Liz felt her stomach lurch as Flora strode exuberantly down the stairs. She returned her smile with a steely stare.

'Flora. What a surprise.'

'Let me introduce my brother,' said Flora, ushering forward the man who had followed her down the stairs. 'Professor Elizabeth Shaw, meet Doctor Brandon Corey.'

'Pleased to make your acquaintance,' he said, taking her hand and kissing it. He made eye contact as he released his hold. Part of her was utterly charmed by him, and the rest of her wanted to squirm as far away as possible.

'So this is the delightful young woman who's been researching our brother?' he asked Flora, who nodded.

He walked over and gazed at the Subject in her pink coat and jodhpurs, blond hair flowing over the packing cases that supported her.

'I assume that this has not become our sister?' he asked, as the Subject grew a neat moustache.

The changes are getting more extreme,' said Liz, stepping forward to stand beside him. 'This morning he was dead four times.'

'How utterly fascinating,' said Brandon, smoothing his hair back from his forehead.

'Perhaps,' said Liz. 'But I don't think I can help him. I'm not even sure I want to.'

'I'm sorry?' said Flora, still arrogant even in surprise. 'I believe we have an arrangement, Professor Shaw.'

'Had,' said Liz. 'We had an arrangement. An arrangement that seemed to involve keeping me in the dark about pretty much every detail of the 'Subject' here.' She waved at the Chinese man lying on the camp bed beside her. 'And that includes his name, the fact that you knew him at all, and the fact that he's trapped in an unstable parallel tunnel.'

'Parallel tunnel?' said Brandon.

'It's what she calls it. Scientifically, if you will.'

'Whatever. You didn't tell her everything?'

'It seemed best. Need to know and all that.'

'So you kept her in the dark rather than tell her anything? How conceited and pointless.'

Brandon turned suddenly, raising his hand and striking Flora across the face in one fluid motion. Flora flinched as he hit her, and turned away, clutching her cheek. She shot her brother a murderous glance, but said nothing.

'Please excuse my sister's rudeness,' said Brandon, smiling broadly at Liz. 'Sometimes she gets a little overprotective. And a little forgetful. Fortunately, she seems to have learned her lesson for now.'

He pulled the chair out from the desk and sat astride it, folding his arms on its back. 'Parallels, Professor Shaw. Alternate universes, no doubt. Interesting hypotheses.' He picked up her paper, leafed through it without interest, then threw it across the room, whistling past Liz's ear. 'All a load of rubbish. Let me explain it to you - a little simplistically perhaps, but explain it nonetheless.'

'I'm all ears.'

Take a picture - a child's painting of a castle, all greens and blues and fire-engine red. Cover it in tracing paper, add a detail - say a forest. You still have the same picture, just slightly different. The old picture is still there. Two pictures, occupying the same space, but different. And only one can survive without the other. Add another layer of tracing paper, add a lighthouse. And another detail and another. Gradually you get to somewhere new, somewhere that bears little resemblance to the castle you started from.'

'You're talking about parallel universes.'

He sneered at her. 'Call it what you will. Bear in mind, however, that there is one underlying world, of which all others are mere shadows, a detail added here and a detail added there. Now my family live in the underlying painting, in the one true world. And a million layers of tracing paper away is where we are now. If things were different, I would take you on a walk that would fill you with fear and wonder, Professor Shaw. I would peel away layers of paper by an act of will alone, change the world one detail at a time until we stood at the foot of Mount Kolvir itself, looking up to the castle where I was born.'

'But?'

'But the last time one of my family tried to walk home, this is what happened,' he nodded at the Subject, still strapped in his straitjacket, blue eyes staring madly at the ceiling. 'Something is amiss with the tapestry of shadow, Professor Shaw.'

'So let me get this straight,' said Liz. 'You're from some alternate reality, that's somehow more real than we are, and you're used to walking from one to another without so much as getting your feet wet. Except that you can't any more. And you need my help.'

'We tried everything else, Professor, but now we can't even get a simple message home.'

'The last bus home broke down and you don't have money for the phone?'

He was on his feet in a second, the chair skidding halfway across the room, his fist raised to within inches of her cheek.

Liz stood, unflinching, waiting for the blow.

Slowly, finger by finger, he uncurled his hand to reveal a simple red jewel on a fine golden chain.

'This may help you,' he said, letting it fall from his hand to hers. It tingled like a swarm of tiny bees. 'It belongs to my father. Lose it and I will kill you.'

He turned, hauled Flora to her feet and pushed her up the stairs ahead of him. Liz gazed at the jewel, turning it over and over in her hand, noting the fine traceries deep within it. To her eyes, it looked almost like an electronic circuit.

'Well,' said the woman who stepped out of a dark corner of the cellar. 'We didn't like him very much, did we, boys and girls?'

Liz looked at the newcomer.

The newcomer looked back at Liz and smiled broadly.

'Hello,' she said cheerfully. 'I'm Ffyona Bendix, society hostess et cetera et cetera et cetera, member of the Dennis the Menace Fan Club (lapsed) although I don't like to talk about that, do a lot of work for charity, like to talk about that even less, currently freelancing for the CIA. I talk too much, I eat too much, and generally I lie all the time, but only when it's going to get me somewhere, and I am very very very very very pleased to meet you at long last Professor Shaw.'

Liz sighed.

'I don't care who you are, or what you're doing here. Just get out and leave me alone, or I'll get that man back down here so fast you won't know what's hit you.'

'Hmmmmm.... nope. You see, he already knows I'm here. The manipulative bugger went to a lot of effort to get me here, and he knows that I know I've been manipulated which makes him either very clever or very stupid and I haven't decided which yet. If I told you I'd read your files in the Glasshouse and that I've got triple greyhound clearance would you be at all surprised?'

Liz sat down. She looked at Ffyona, standing with her hands on her hips. She looked at the Subject, a bearded man in a white dress with his hair piled in two spirals piled on each side of his head. She looked at her shoes, and tapped her heels together three times and wished to go home. Nothing happened.

'So,' continued Ffyona, 'I guess that this is where you do something terribly scientific?'

An hour later, Liz had finished her investigation of the jewel. Ffyona had been surprisingly helpful, even pointing out some of the anomalies in the underlying lattice that Liz had missed herself. There were a number of abnormalities in the gem, not least of which was its peculiar refractive property. It drew the eye of the viewer deep into its ruby red heart, to the faint filigree that could not be entirely natural.

'I wish I had a laser,' mused Liz.

'As in a super zap gun from Star Trek, or one of those super focussed scientific thingies?'

Liz wrinkled her nose. 'Guess,' she said.

'I've got one here,' replied Ffyona, just as Liz was calculating the best time to ask Flora to get one for her. Ffyona reached into her bag and pulled out her Discman.

'I know it's anachronistic and everything,' she said, 'but if Jane Seymour can get away with Doctor Quinn Medicine Woman, then I feel perfectly justified.'

Liz looked at the Discman, then at Ffyona's grinning face.

'I'm going to pretend this isn't happening,' she said, taking the Discman from Ffyona, examining it, already working on the best method of disassembly.

The jewel was held firmly in a clamp on the floor, just on the edge of the area affected by the Subject - clearly visible where the flag stones of the cellar gave way to rush matting. The laser was mounted in a matchbox, about twelve inches away. The Subject himself was asleep in his cot. There was a faint smell of urea in the air, and Ffyona was wearing sunglasses.

'This is almost as nerve wracking as wondering who Cartman's father was,' she mused. 'Can we switch it on now?'

Liz was kneeling by the laser, making final precise adjustments.

'You do realise that I don't know what's going to happen here?' she asked.

Ffyona nodded. 'You know, you remind me of Carol Vorderman. In a good way.'

And Liz turned on the laser.

The beam of red light stabbed across the cellar, hitting a flat side of the jewel. Liz adjusted the laser. It should have reflected back, or refracted, or at least done something. But no - the jewel was absorbing the light.

Tm assuming that this isn't a good thing?' asked Ffyona, and Liz shot her an unsympathetic glare that made her fall silent again.

They watched the laser for a full minute. Nothing continued to happen, so they turned it off.

'Well,' said Ffyona. 'It was worth a shot, I'm sure. Now I'm sure you won't mind if I pinch this thing, will you? I can tie you up and make it look like you struggled if that'll make you feel better.' She reached down and plucked the jewel from the stand.

Liz sighed. 'Take the damn thing. But I'm coming with you.'

She took her overcoat from a hook by her desk, grabbed her matchbox laser, and together they left the cellar, the jewel still warm in Ffyona's pocket.

Alone, in the dark, the Subject continued to change, now hovering above a luxurious bed.

'Where have you been?' hissed Ben as Ffyona sidled up to him. 'I've been talking to the Secretary of State for hours now. He wants to meet you, by the way.'

Ffyona tried to look apologetic. 'I was debriefing the Spanish Ambassador,' she explained, hoping that Ben would believe her.

'Well, I'm leaving,' said Ben. 'You can come with me if you want, or you can go back to your Ambassador.'

Ffyona pouted. Part of the problem at the moment was that she thought Ben was unbearably cute when he was angry. Thanks to her little distraction she hadn't managed to find any alternatives to leaving with Ben. It wasn't such a bad option.

'Just let me freshen up,' she said, running her tongue over her lips in a way that she hoped was endearing.

Ben smiled. 'I'll meet you outside,' he said. 'Don't be long.'

Back to the powder room. Tasmin followed her in.

'You got it?'

Ffyona leant against one of the wash hand basins.

'Do you think I would be here otherwise?' she said, reaching into her pocket and producing the jewel. 'Pretty little thing, isn't it? What do you want it for?'

Tasmin's hand fluttered over her badly concealed pistol.

'You know I can't tell you that, Ffyona. I'm not even sure myself.'

'It wasn't as simple as I thought. I might need to think twice about any future jobs for you, Tasmin. Unless I wake up tomorrow morning to find a hundred thousand dollars in my account. That might make me more flexible.' Ffyona folded her hand around the gem, hiding it from view.

Tasmin replied without hesitation. 'It's done. Give it to me.'

As Ffyona tossed the jewel across the room, she wondered if she should have asked for a million.

She let Tasmin leave first. She figured the CIA agent would head out of the embassy immediately, taking the jewel somewhere. Liz was stationed outside, and would follow her. Straightforward double cross. Ffyona was quite pleased with her plan. Of course, she had a nagging feeling that she had forgotten something.

'Liz!'

'Ben?'

At first she wasn't even sure it was him, he looked so different from her memories. Instead of jeans and a tee shirt he was in a tuxedo; instead of rugged stubble he was clean-shaven. But it was Ben.

She stepped towards him gingerly and he replied by rushing towards her, wrapping her up in his arms and sweeping her off her feet, holding her tight in his embrace and swinging her through three hundred and sixty degrees of warm affection. As soon as her feet touched the ground again, her hands were on his neck, dragging his face down into a deep and wonderful kiss that reminded her of Jesus Green and Grantchester and how much she had missed him.

'What on earth are you doing here?' he asked as soon as he had his breath back, peering over his shoulder. 'I mean, I'm glad to see you and everything, it's just... a surprise.'

'It's a long story, Ben.'

Liz was also looking over Ben's shoulder, and so it was she that first caught sight of Ffyona.

Ffyona stood half way down the staircase leading from the embassy doors to the driveway. She was looking at Ben and Liz. Staring at them. Slowly, she shook her head in disbelief and walked purposefully down the stairs, glaring, before turning away and striding in to the night.

Liz and Ben swore at the same time, then looked at each other.

'I said it was a long story,' said Liz. She paused. 'I should go after her. Wait here.' She was surprised when he did as she asked.

She was angry. Sodding angry.

She knew that she had only herself to blame. She knew that she knew only half of what was going on, possibly even less than that. Ben meant nothing to her. Liz meant nothing to her. Nobody mattered except herself.

She was stomping through the streets of New York in a light drizzle, at two in the morning, four thousand miles and twenty-five years away from home. And she was angry with herself because something about seeing Liz and Ben together like that had got to her. Where the hell was her training now?

Her hair was getting wet as the rain got heavier.

She hated that.

The thing was that she felt that she knew Liz. She'd read all the files in the Glasshouse. Liz was a professional scientist. She should have been alert, should have been watching out for Tasmin - who could be anywhere by now. It was all Liz's fault. Liz was a professional scientist.

A scientist. No espionage training. The wrong type of mental discipline. True, Ben could be... distracting. No wonder Liz had lost Tasmin. It was all her own fault; sending a woman to do a girl's job. Sod sod sod sod sod.

She had her hand over her eyes now, keeping her fringe out of her face, so she could focus on her feet and avoid puddles. She had a ladder in her tights. That was all she needed. A miserable end to a miserable night.

She walked straight into a man in a dark green overcoat, hurrying in the opposite direction, a hat pulled low over his forehead.

'Oh, I'm so terribly sorry,' she said.

He grunted in reply as he pushed past her. There was a glint of light as something fell from his pocket. Something red and shiny on a golden chain. She put her foot down on top of it.

'Give that to me, girl,' said Brandon. His face caught the amber glow of the street lamp and it was all she could do not to flinch at the glint in his eye, the determination in his expression.

'Yeah, yeah, sure,' she said. 'Just one little question...' She paused. She had a hundred little questions.

'What?' His hand was reaching inside his coat.

'You used the CIA to hire me to steal the jewel from you so that I could give it back to you. Doesn't make sense. Unless, of course, you wanted to hide the jewel somewhere. Let your sister think that the intelligent and stunningly attractive British thief with the uncanny knack of babbling too much under stress had taken it, when actually you had it. After all, it's terribly powerful, isn't it? And I get the impression that you don't want your sister to have access to that power. And you don't care tuppence about the guy on the trolley, do you?'

'Not bad, Miss Bendix, not bad. The 'guy on the trolley' is one of my brothers, and no, I don't really care if he lives or dies. I just needed to stabilise his condition, and for that I needed the jewel.'

'So why the subterfuge?'

'Flora's stupid, but she's useful. I'm not ready to kill her yet, but I'm not ready for her to know I have the jewel, either. Hence a bit of subterfuge, a bait and switch. And with only one loose end.' He pulled a cigarette case and lighter from an inside pocket.

Ffyona breathed a sigh of relief. 'Now, for one horrible second there I thought you were going to shoot me.'

'Why no, Miss Bendix. That would be terribly impolite.'

Ffyona heard the shot before she felt the bullet. Her body was jolted forward by the impact, falling to her knees first, then twisting sideways, curiously aware of how wet and cold the sidewalk was beneath her, of how some of the wetness was her own warmth ebbing away from her, of how dark it was suddenly becoming.

'It's Tasmin's turn to do the shooting.'

She saw Tasmin bending over her, lifting the jewel from where it lay. She tried to reach up, to stop her, to...

And then there was cold darkness.

'Leave her, Tasmin,' said Brandon. 'Let the local police deal with her.'

Tasmin stepped over the lifeless body.

'It's a shame I had to kill her, but it will throw Flora off the scent.'

'Give me the jewel.'

Brandon and Tasmin paused, and turned to the source of the new voice.

'Professor Shaw, I don't know what you think you're trying to do, but I should warn you that unless you turn around and go home now, back to Cambridge and your little University, I will be forced to kill you. It's nothing personal, just a general hatred of loose ends.[1]

Liz was holding something out in front of her, pointing it at them. It looked too small to be a gun.

'Give me the jewel.' There was a slight quavering in Liz's voice that she hoped they hadn't picked up on.

'This thing?'

Brandon dangled the jewel from its chain enticingly. Tasmin had her gun trained on
Liz

Liz squeezed the button in her hand.

'A torch?' laughed Brandon as a beam of red light stabbed across the dark.

'It was the best I could do at short notice,' said Liz, as the laser beam met the jewel.

Resonance. Page seventeen of *'The What-if Scenario'* discussed the idea of resonance between phase states of a crystal multiverse. Resonance. That was what she'd been trying in the cellar, of course, trying to excite the gem, to focus it, to force the subject back into a fixed state. Resonance. She had only realised as she stood in the shadows, watching Ffyona die. She had realised then how straightforward it would be to create a parallel tunnel, to nudge the universe from one state to another. Resonance.

The beam met the jewel and everything changed.

The beam of red light stabbed across the cellar, hitting a flat side of the jewel. Liz adjusted the laser. It should have reflected back, or refracted, or at least done something. But no - the jewel was absorbing the light.

The beam met the jewel and everything changed, a slight shift sideways to what might have been.

'I'm assuming that this isn't a good thing?' asked Ffyona, and Liz shot her an unsympathetic glare that made her fall silent again.

The beam met the jewel in the alley. The beam met the jewel in the lab. Resonance.

They watched the laser for a full minute.

Nothing continued to happen, so they turned it off.

'Well,' said Ffyona. 'That was about as much fun as a barrel full of... monkeys.' Ffyona was looking at the Subject - a stocky bearded man in his mid thirties, a sword buckled at his waist and a black and silver cape over his shoulder.

'Er - Liz?'

'What?'

'Wasn't I dead a minute ago?'

Liz smiled. 'It's a possibility.'

Ffyona looked at her dress - intact, and her tights - hadn't they been laddered? One by one, memories jigsawed back into place.

'I think,' she said, 'I should take this.' She reached down and picked up the jewel, slipping it into her handbag.

'Yes,' agreed Liz. 'I'll tell Flora that it was lost in the experiment, slipped through into another shadow. That'll annoy her, but I'm sure she'll believe it.'

The Subject was still the same stocky man in his mid thirties, and he was starting to wake up.

Ffyona hugged Liz before she left. Liz returned the embrace awkwardly. Only when the cellar door had closed did she begin to relax.

'Well,' she said to herself. 'It's been quite a day.'

She could have waited for the Subject to regain full consciousness. She could have gone back to Flora's house, or to the Ambassador's reception to meet Ben again.

She hailed a cab for the airport and got a ticket on the first flight back to London.

Epilogue

I made my way back to Saint Modan's, back up to the roof. I'd left some stuff up there; a grapple gun and my Binocs, and I couldn't afford a replacement. Also, I had unfinished business.

I'd like to say that I was changed by my near-death experience (is it a near-death experience when you can actually remember dying but it happened in a slightly alternate universe?) and that that was what had brought me to a church. The nearness to God.

I pulled the jewel out of my handbag. As I turned it in my hands it seemed so unremarkable - sure, it caught the light from the street lamp nicely and reflected it at pretty angles, but for all I could tell it was just a lump of glass.

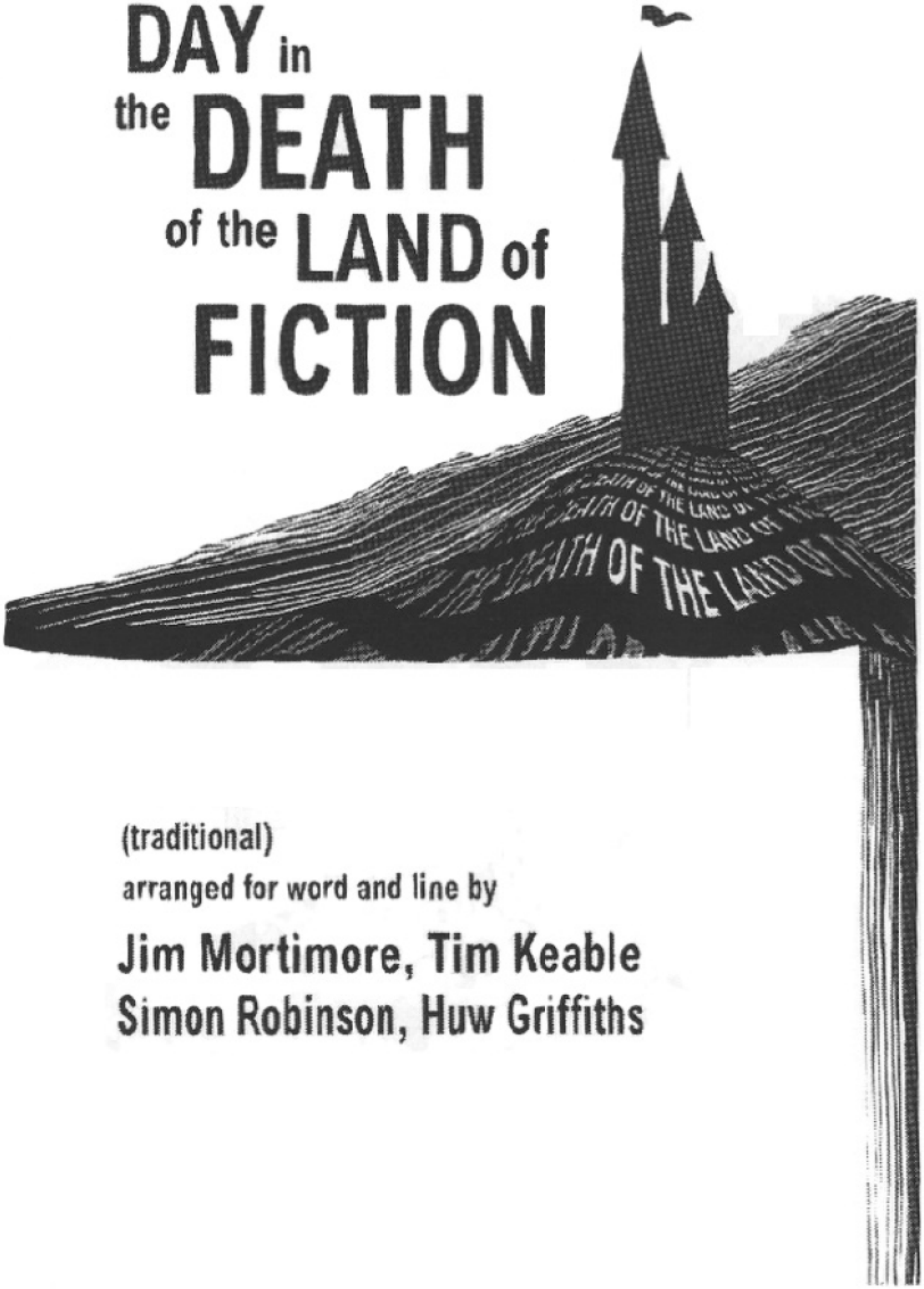
I had a bargaining tool. I could use it against Tasmin, or maybe Brandon Corey. He'd be back. He would be angry too, there would be fire in his eyes, in his soul. I wouldn't be safe from him. Oddly, I was looking forward to the rematch.

But in the short term, I silently thanked the Lord for

Liz's scientific mental discipline, and slid the gem under one of Gary's claws.

'Look after this for me,' I said, kissing him on the nose. Then it was back down to the street, where I hailed a cab. I shot Gary one last glance before I clambered in, and I was almost sure he was smiling.

a DAY in the DEATH of the LAND of FICTION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DEATH OF THE LAND OF
DEATH OF THE LAND OF

(traditional)
arranged for word and line by

Jim Mortimore, Tim Keable
Simon Robinson, Huw Griffiths

"Science Fiction is the last remaining outpost of free literary expression and experiment in our damned conventional culture."

A letter from Alfred Bester
Starmont, 1982

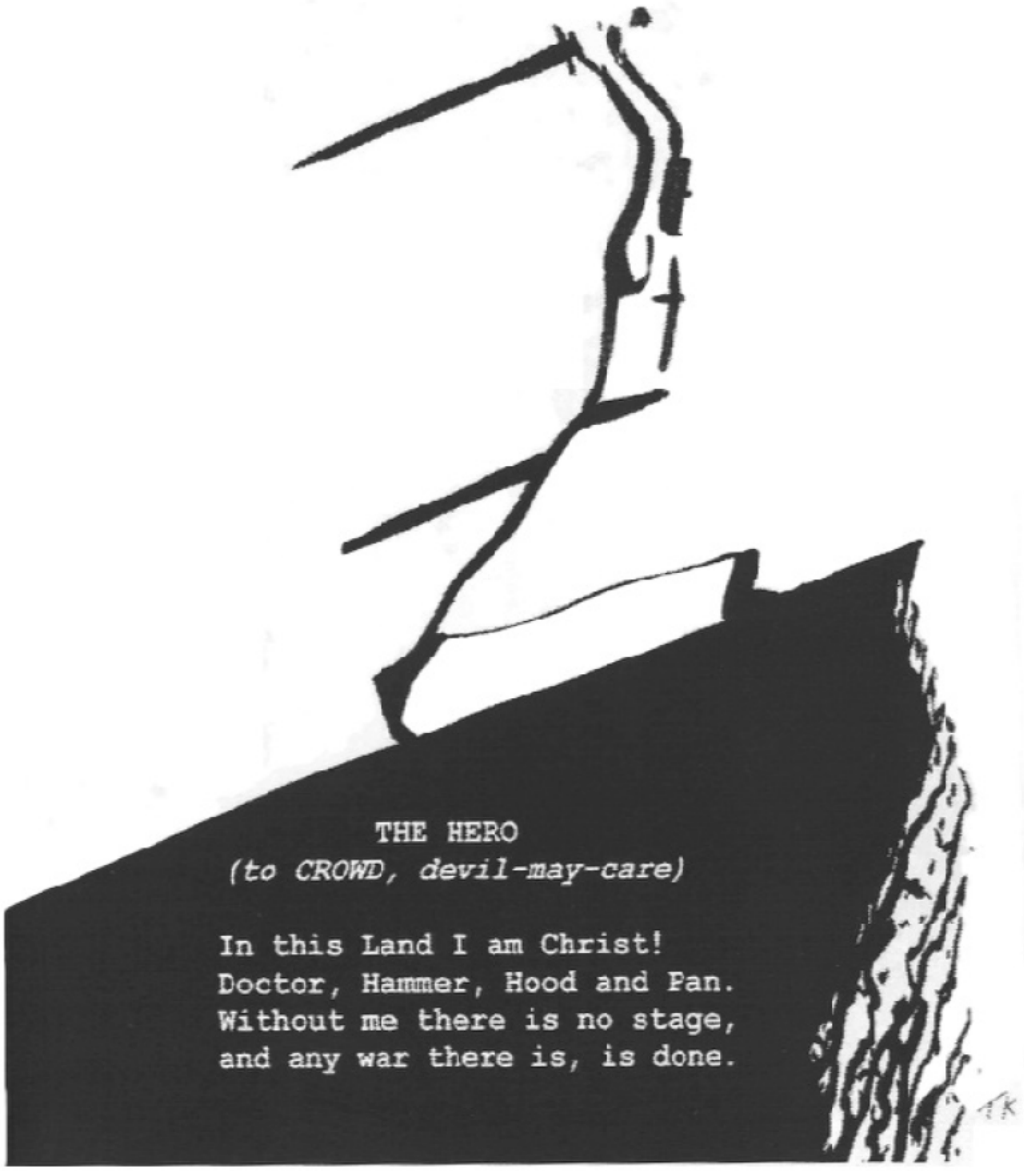
THE ACT

FADE IN

EXT. CITY. ARENA. NOON.

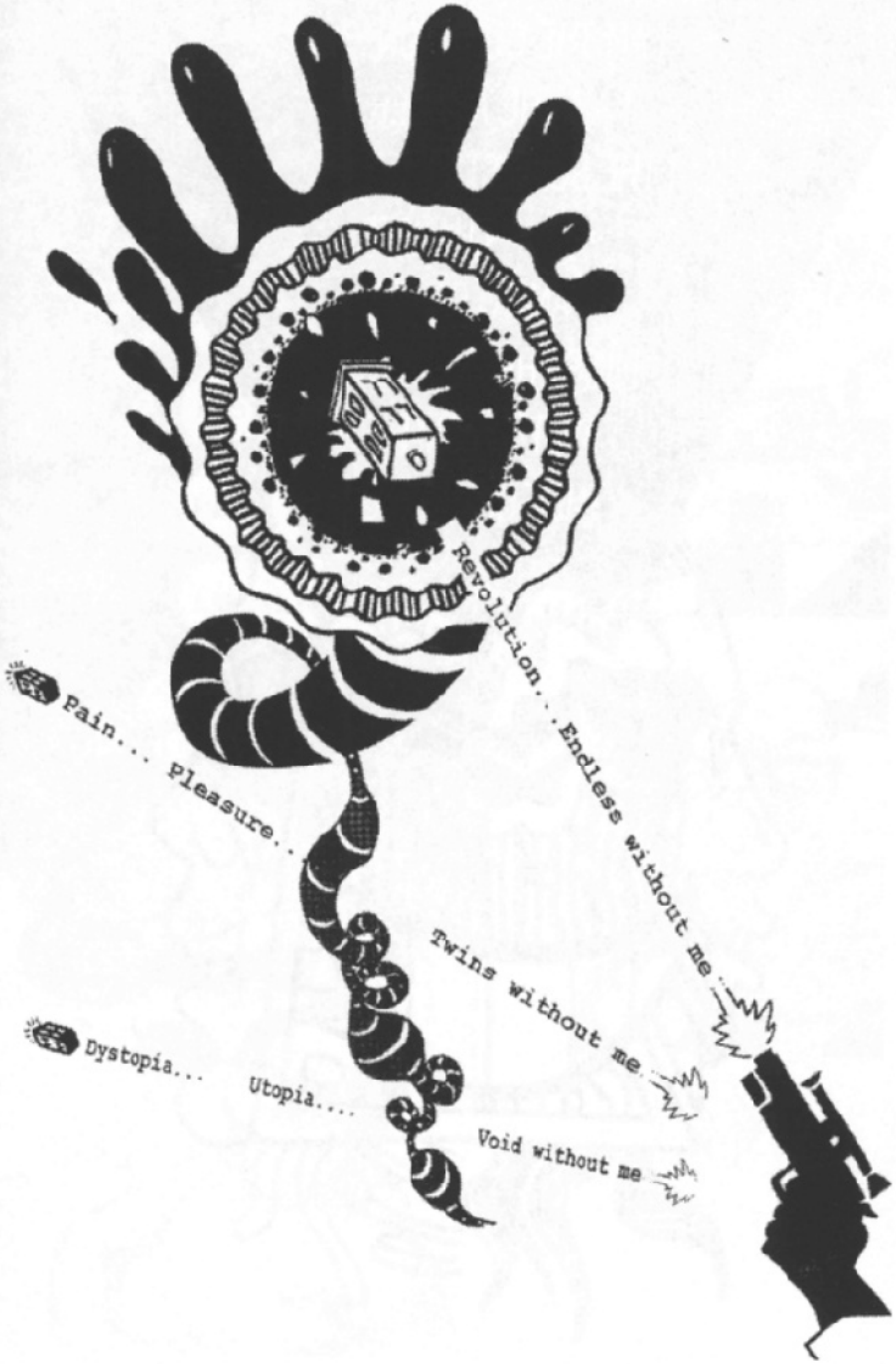
The sun is brilliant, a burning light of judgement.
A huge CROWD screams with a single voice:
hot for blood.

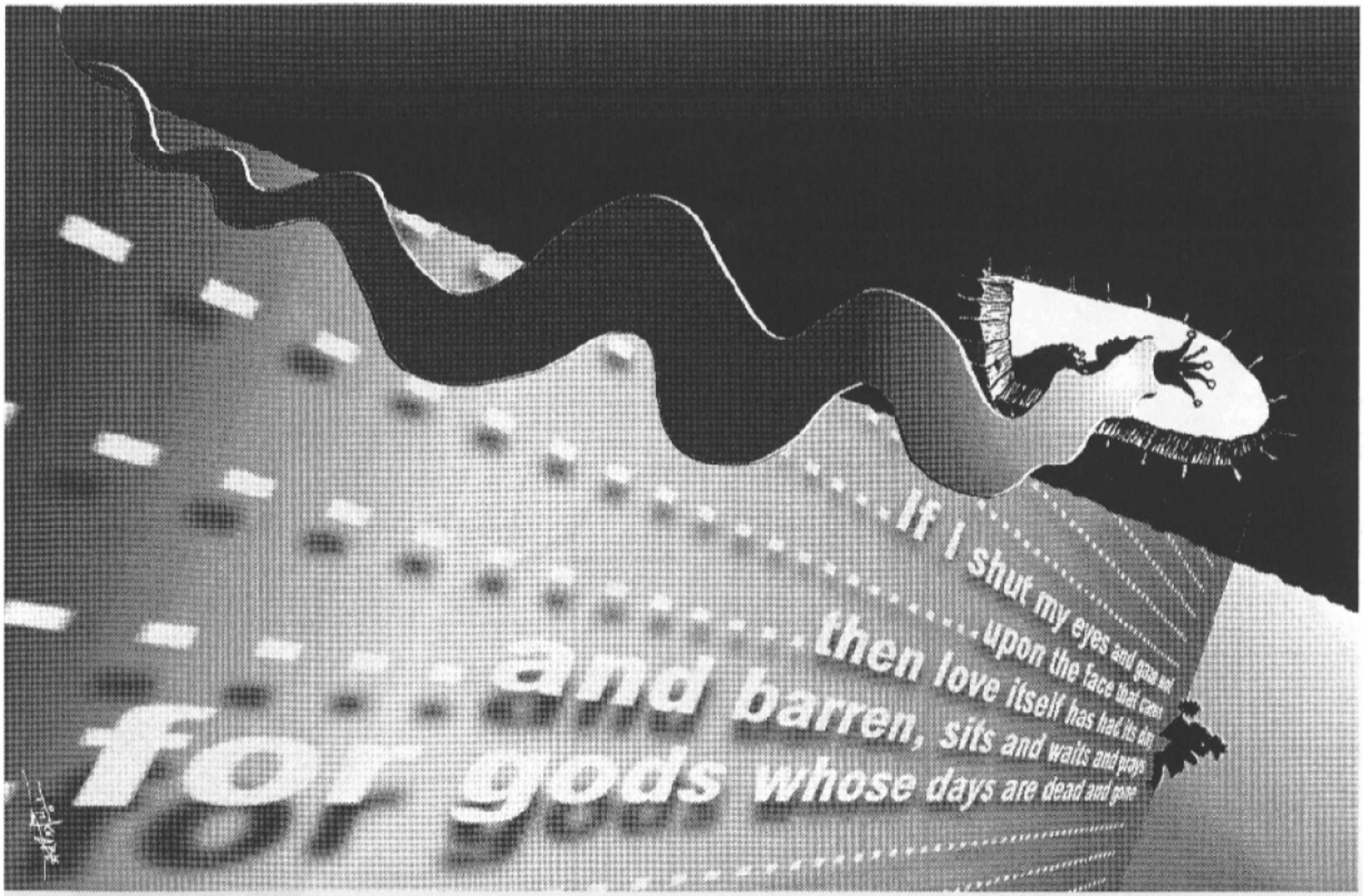
Enter a sword-wielding HERO to MUCH APPLAUSE.



THE HERO
(to CROWD, devil-may-care)

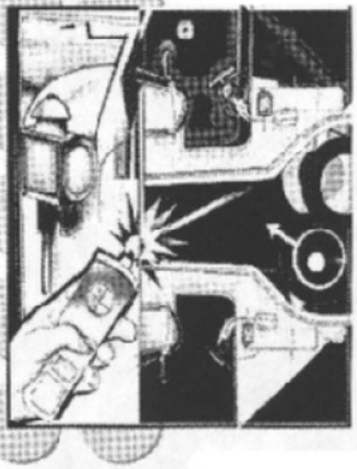
In this Land I am Christ!
Doctor, Hammer, Hood and Pan.
Without me there is no stage,
and any war there is, is done.

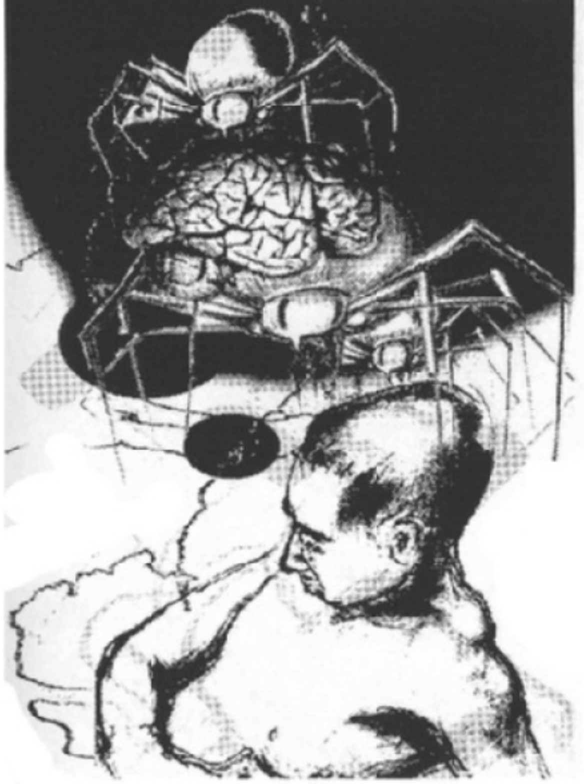

Revolution... Endless without me
Pain... Pleasure...
Twins without me
Dystopia... Utopia....
Void without me



If I shut my eyes and gaze not
upon the face that cares
then love itself has had its day
and barren, sits and waits and prays
for gods whose days are dead and gone

iam ▸▸ Toys and Boys and
Girls and Pearls and
Beasts and Feasts and
North and East and
South and West and
Worst and Best and
I am everything! Nothing less





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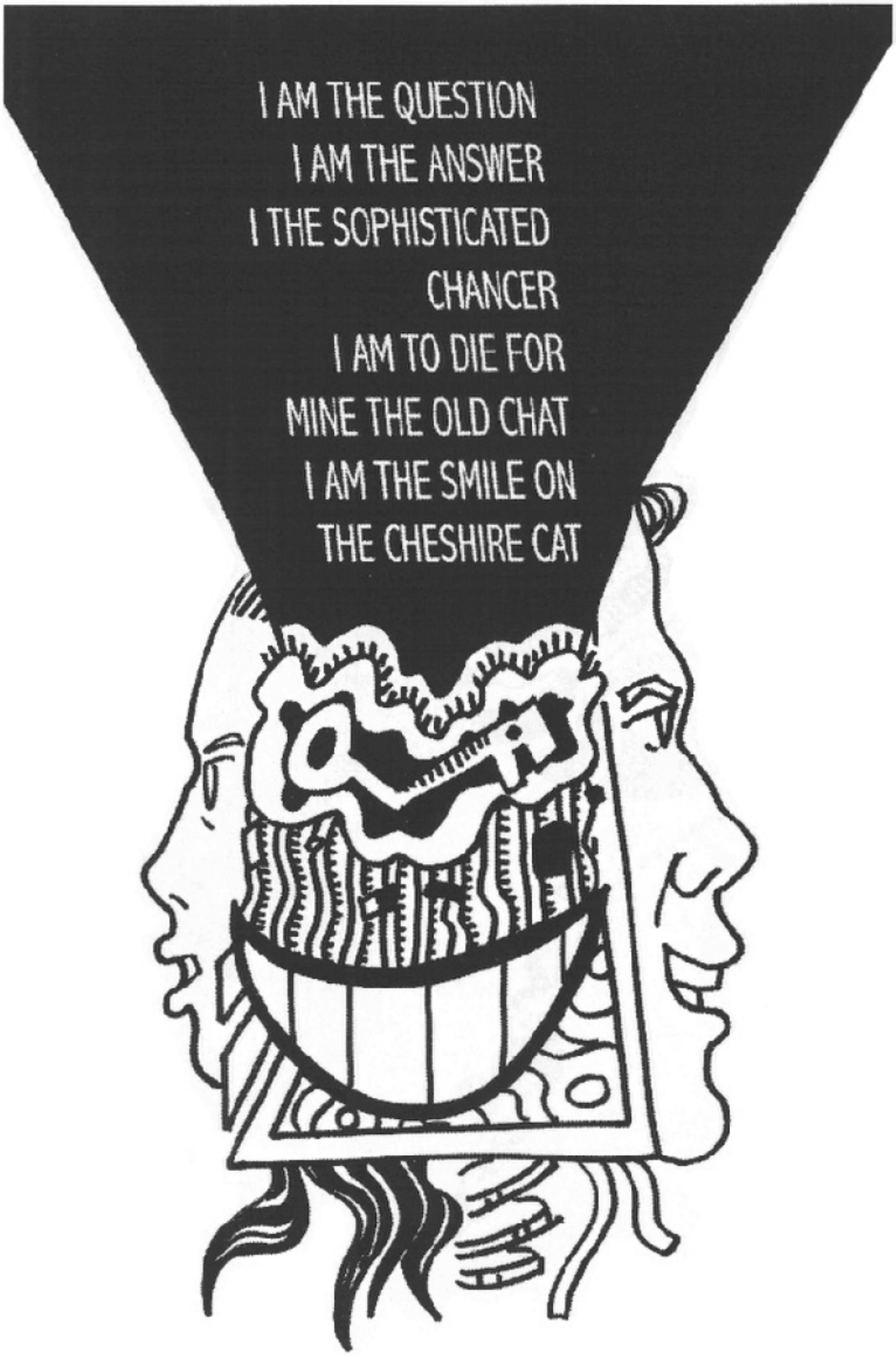
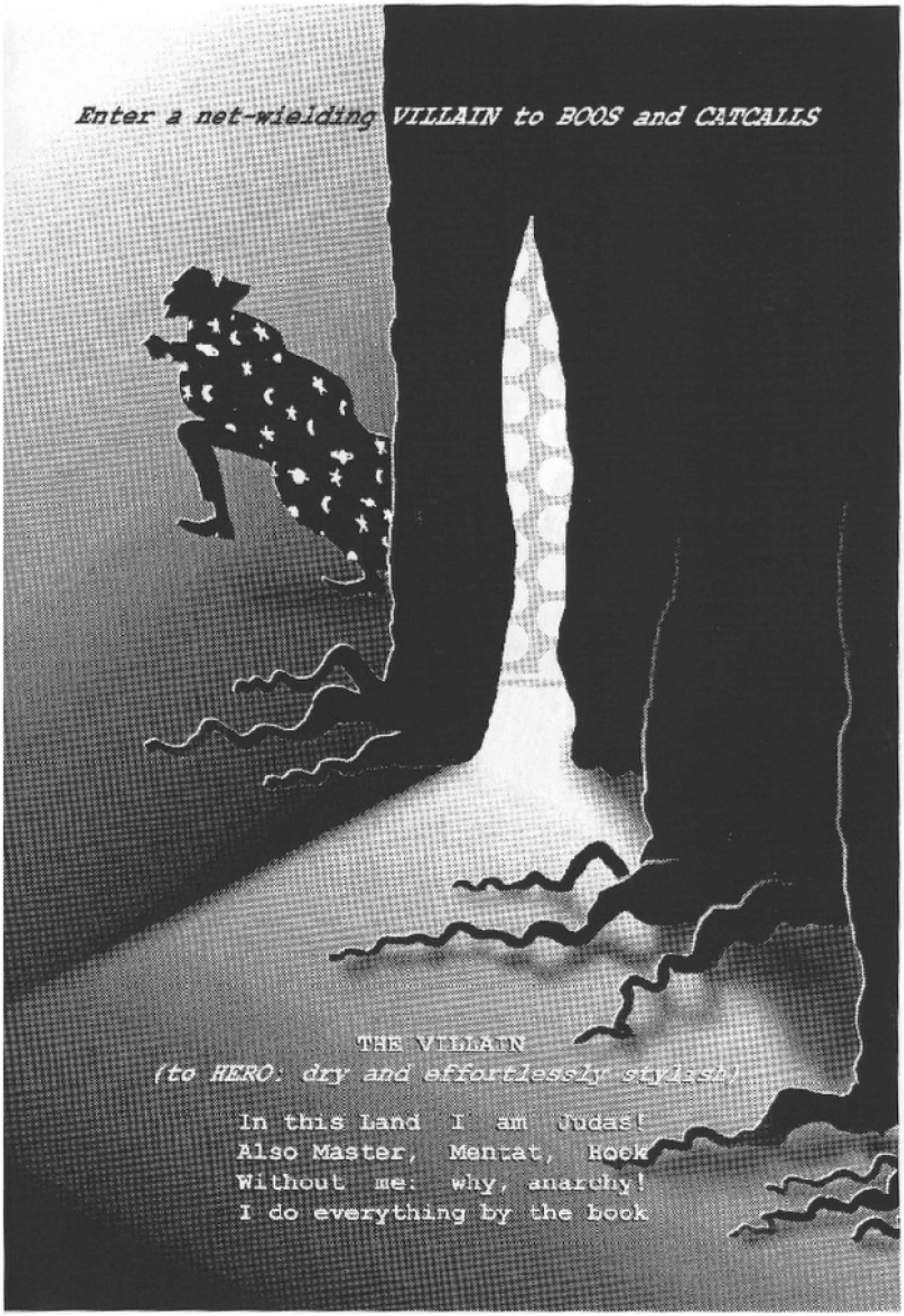


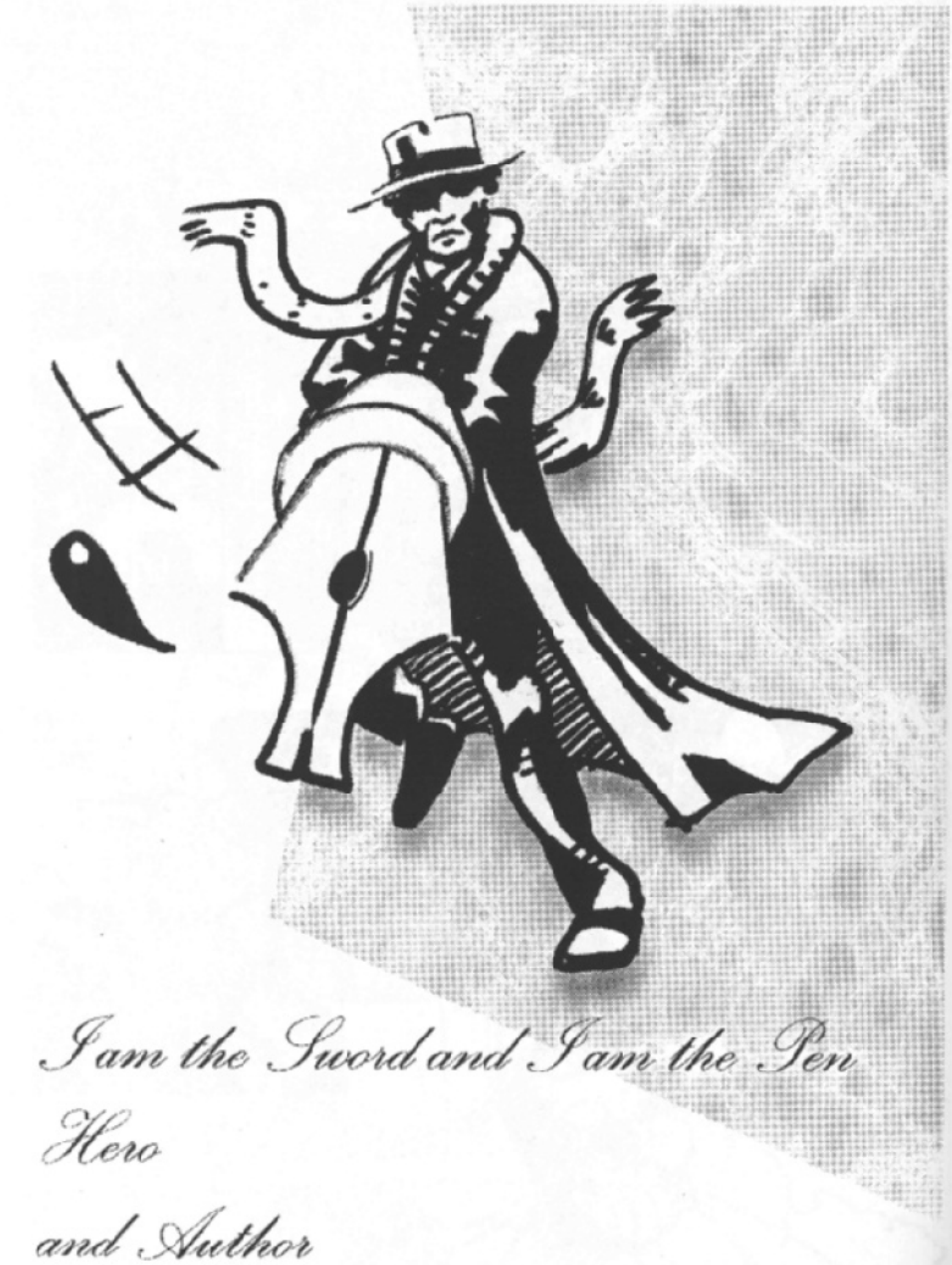
I AM THE QUESTION
I AM THE ANSWER
I THE SOPHISTICATED
CHANCER
I AM TO DIE FOR
MINE THE OLD CHAT
I AM THE SMILE ON
THE CHESHIRE CAT



Enter a net-wielding VILLAIN to BOOS and CATCALLS

THE VILLAIN
(to HERO: dry and effortlessly stylish)

In this Land I am Judas!
Also Master, Mentat, Hook
Without me: why, anarchy!
I do everything by the book

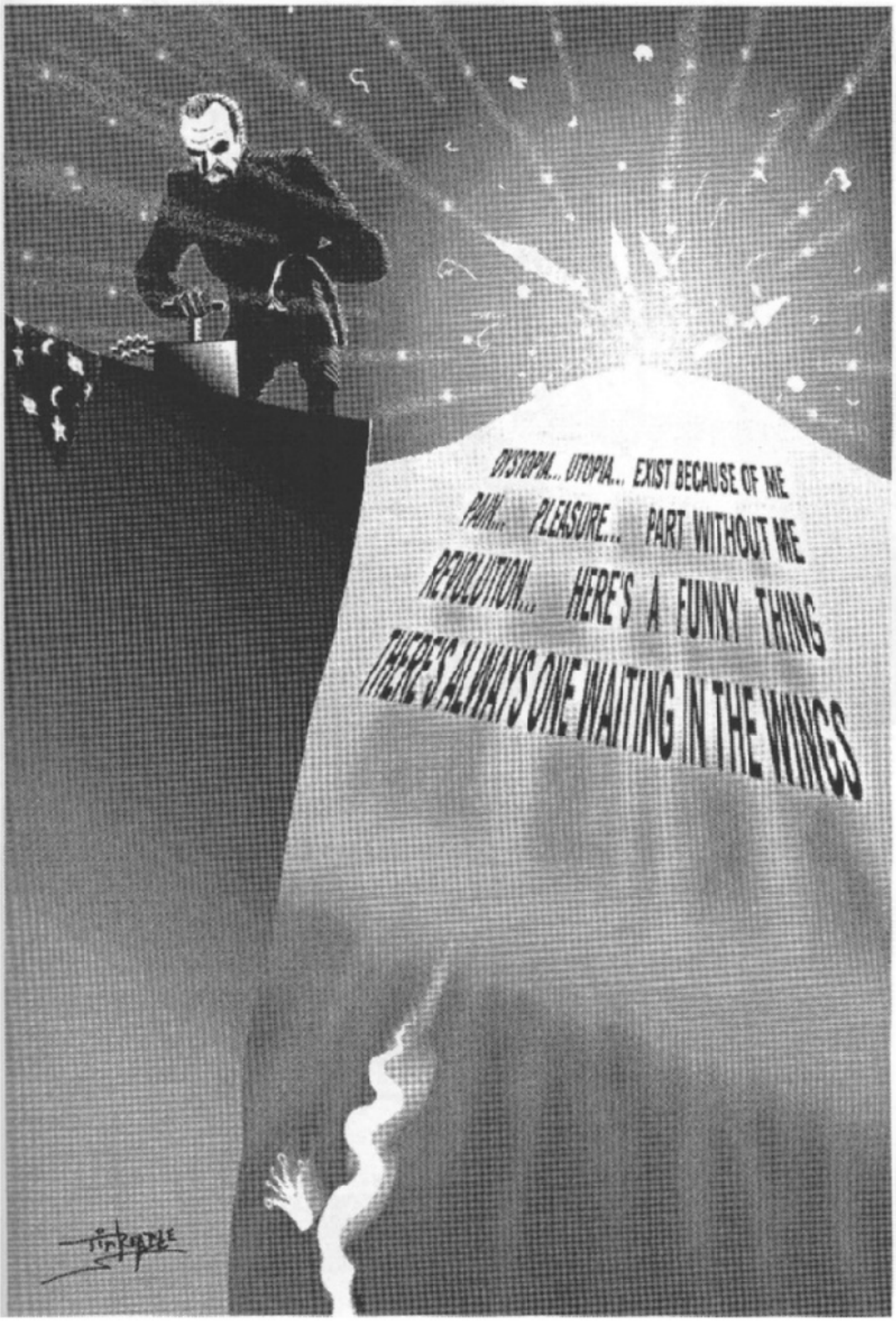


I am the Sword and I am the Pen

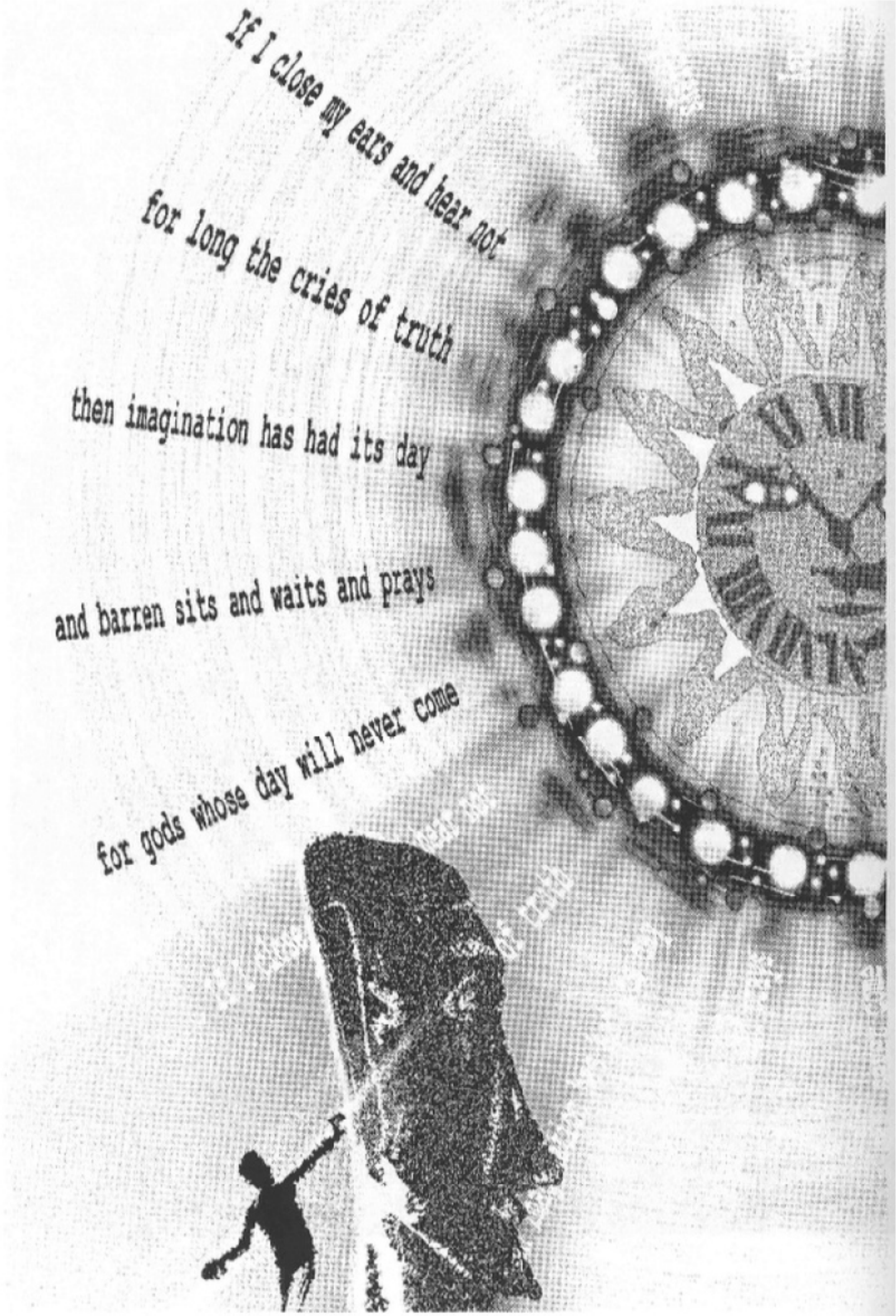
Hero

and Author

on whom You depend

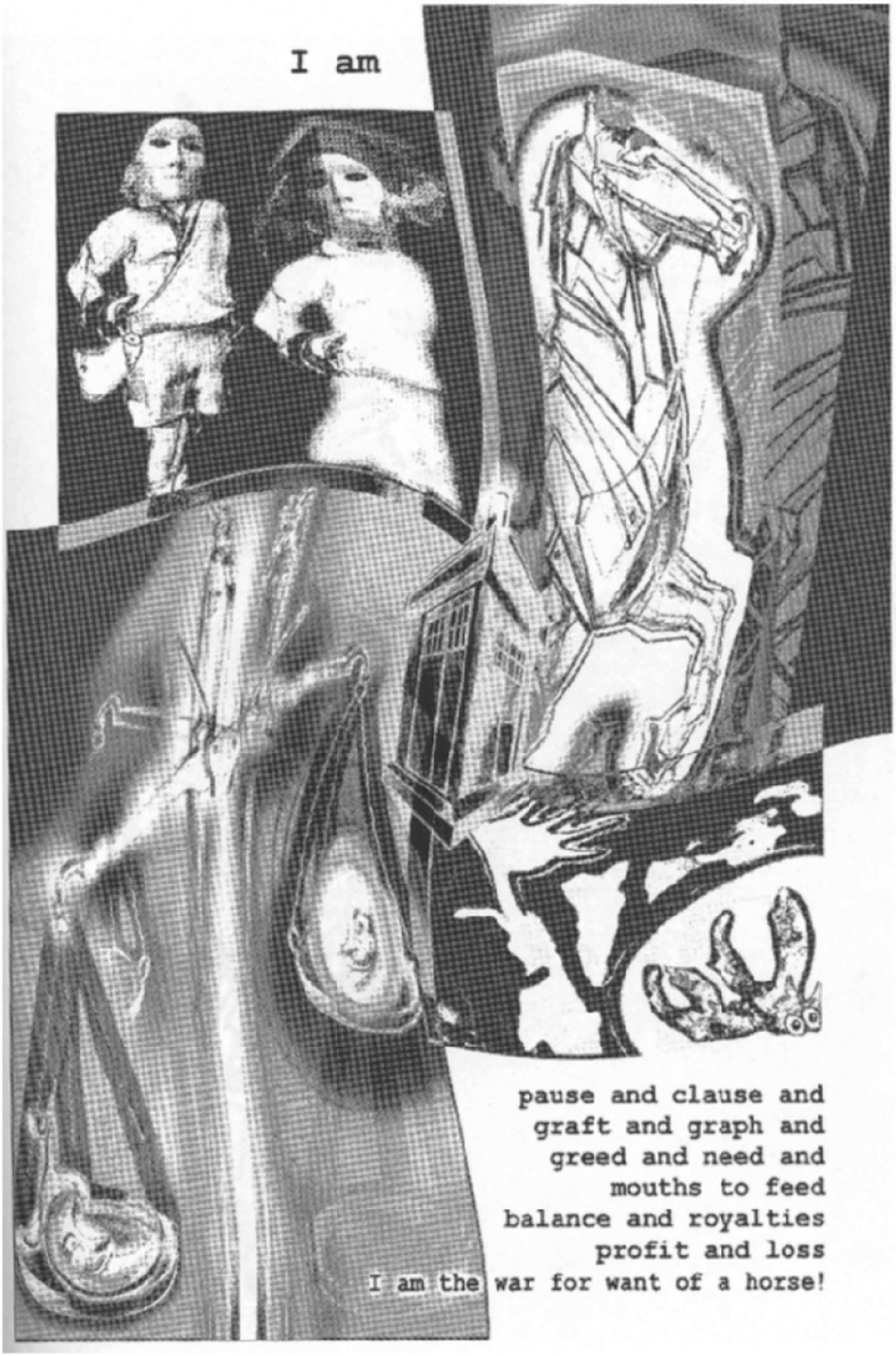


DYSTOPIA... UTOPIA... EXIST BECAUSE OF ME
PAIN... PLEASURE... PART WITHOUT ME
REVOLUTION... HERE'S A FUNNY THING
THERE'S ALWAYS ONE WAITING IN THE WINGS



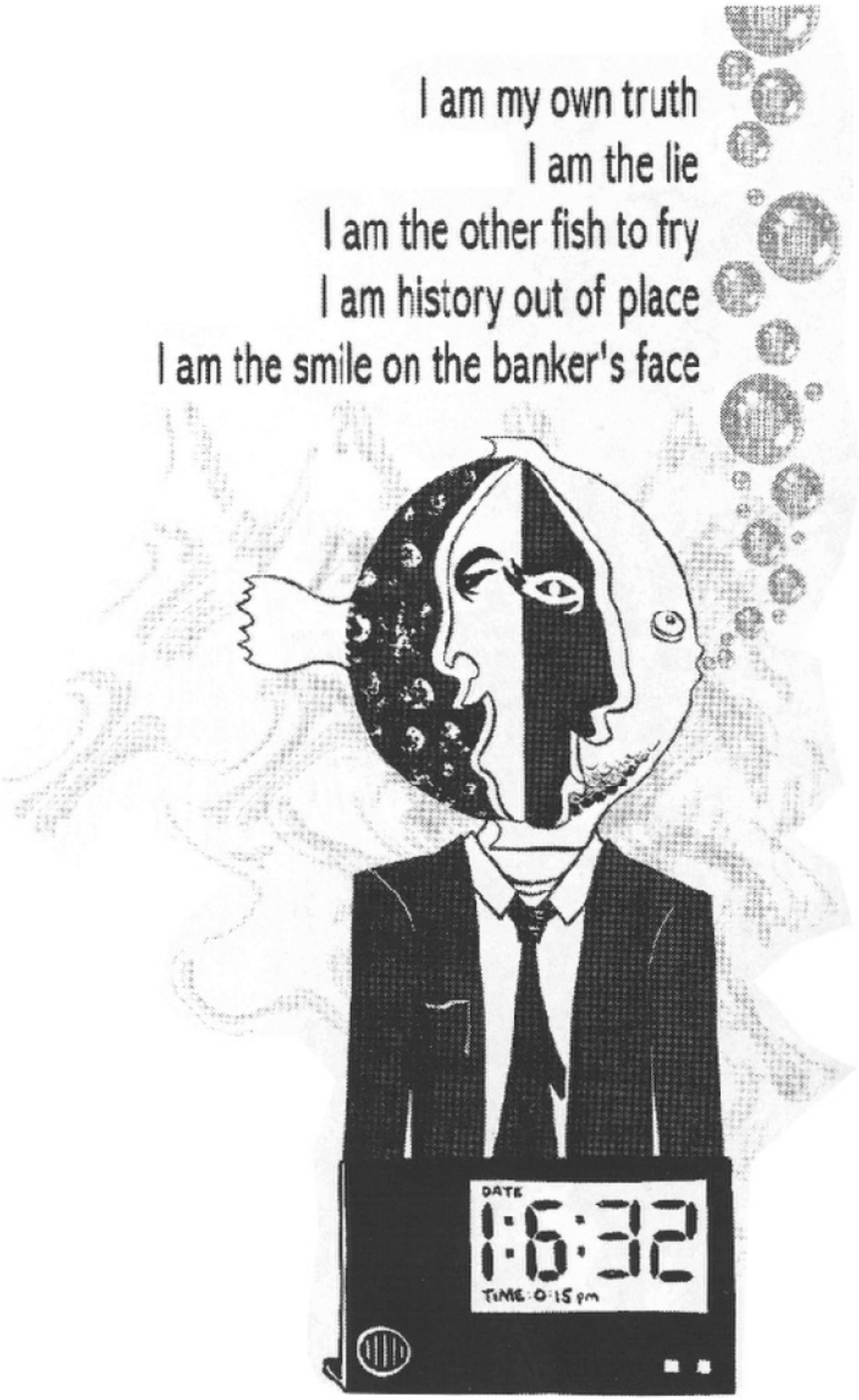
If I close my ears and hear not
for long the cries of truth
then imagination has had its day
and barren sits and waits and prays
for gods whose day will never come

I am



pause and clause and
graft and graph and
greed and need and
mouths to feed
balance and royalties
profit and loss
I am the war for want of a horse!

I am my own truth
I am the lie
I am the other fish to fry
I am history out of place
I am the smile on the banker's face

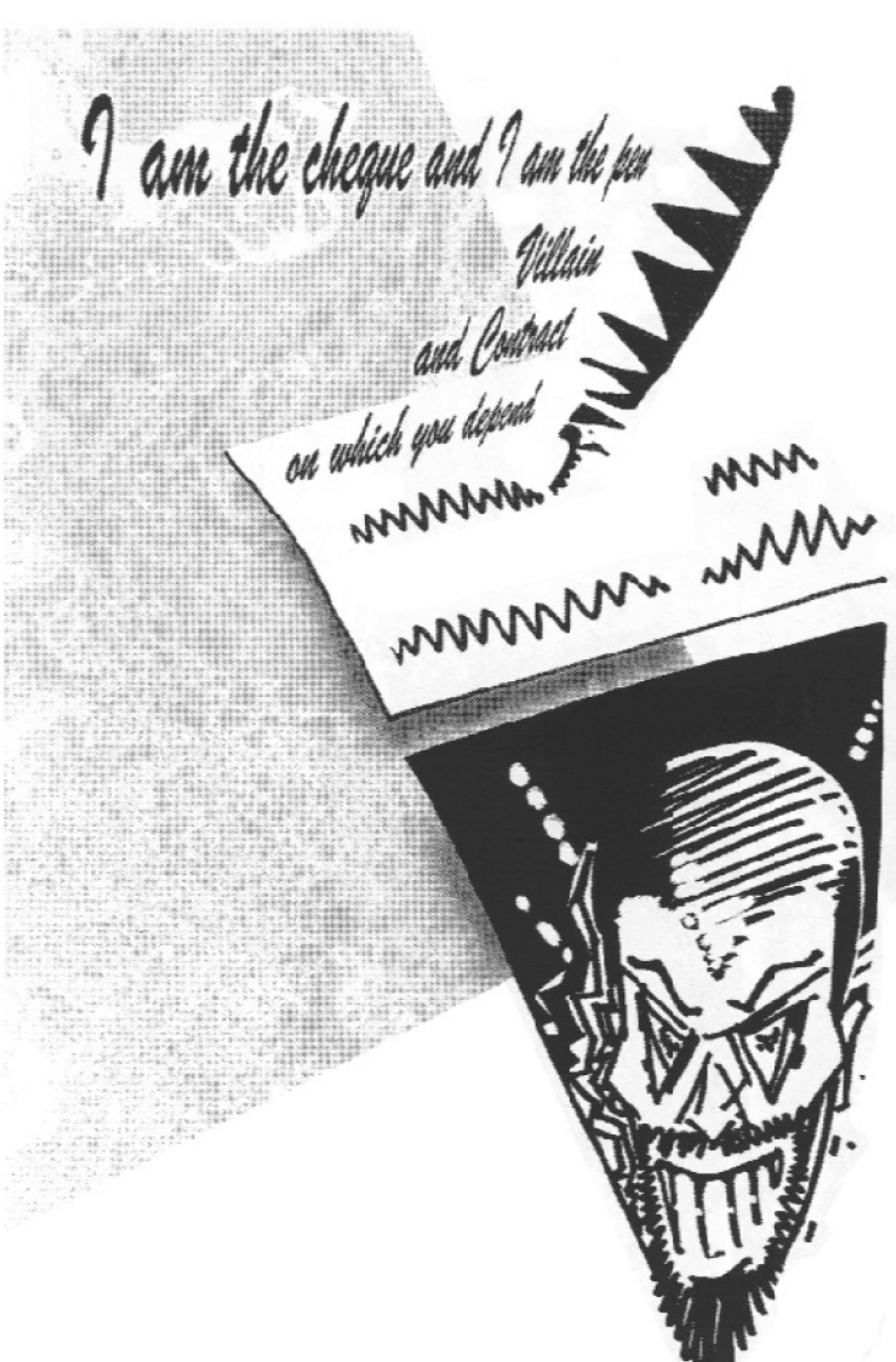

DATE
1:6:32
TIME: 0:15 pm

Enter SIDEKICK to SCATTERED APPLAUSE.

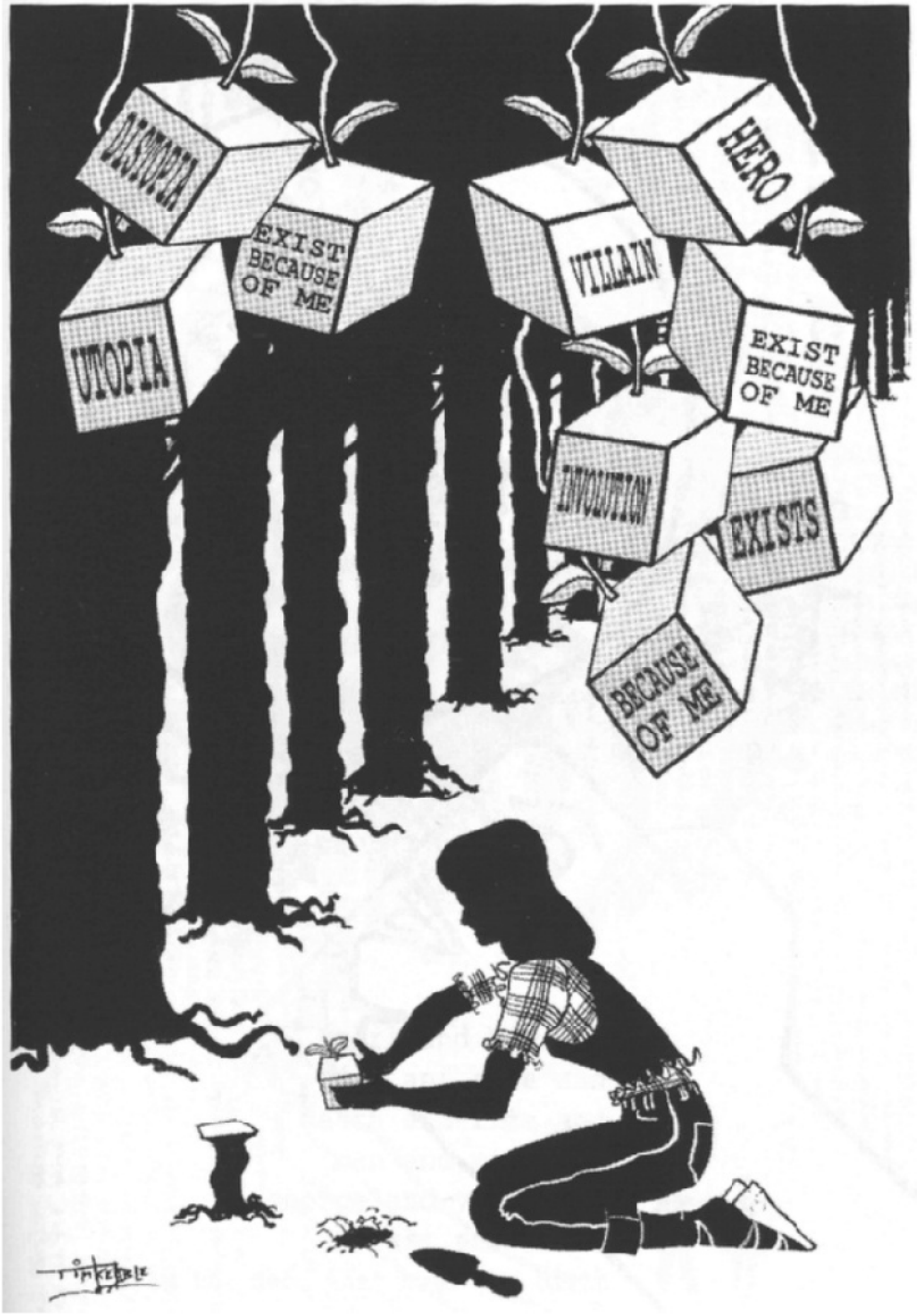
SIDEKICK

(to HERO and VILLAIN)

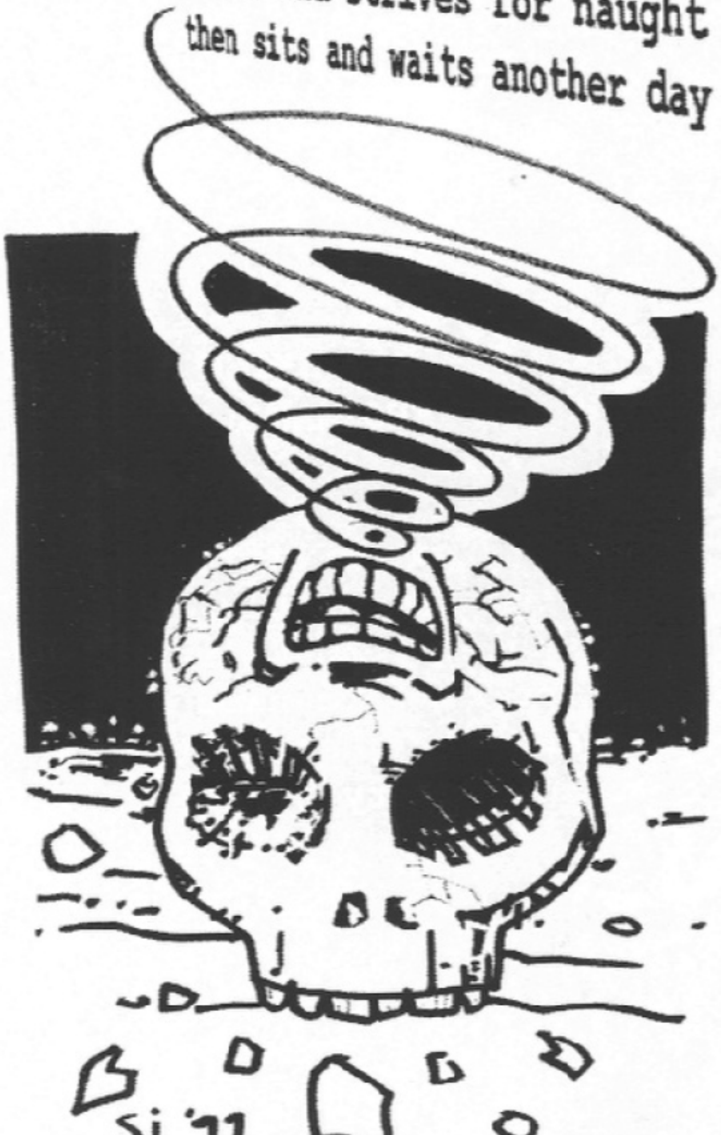
In this land I am Tink
Alastair, Peter,
James and Paul
and everyone else
too many to name
and all just graffiti
on history's wall

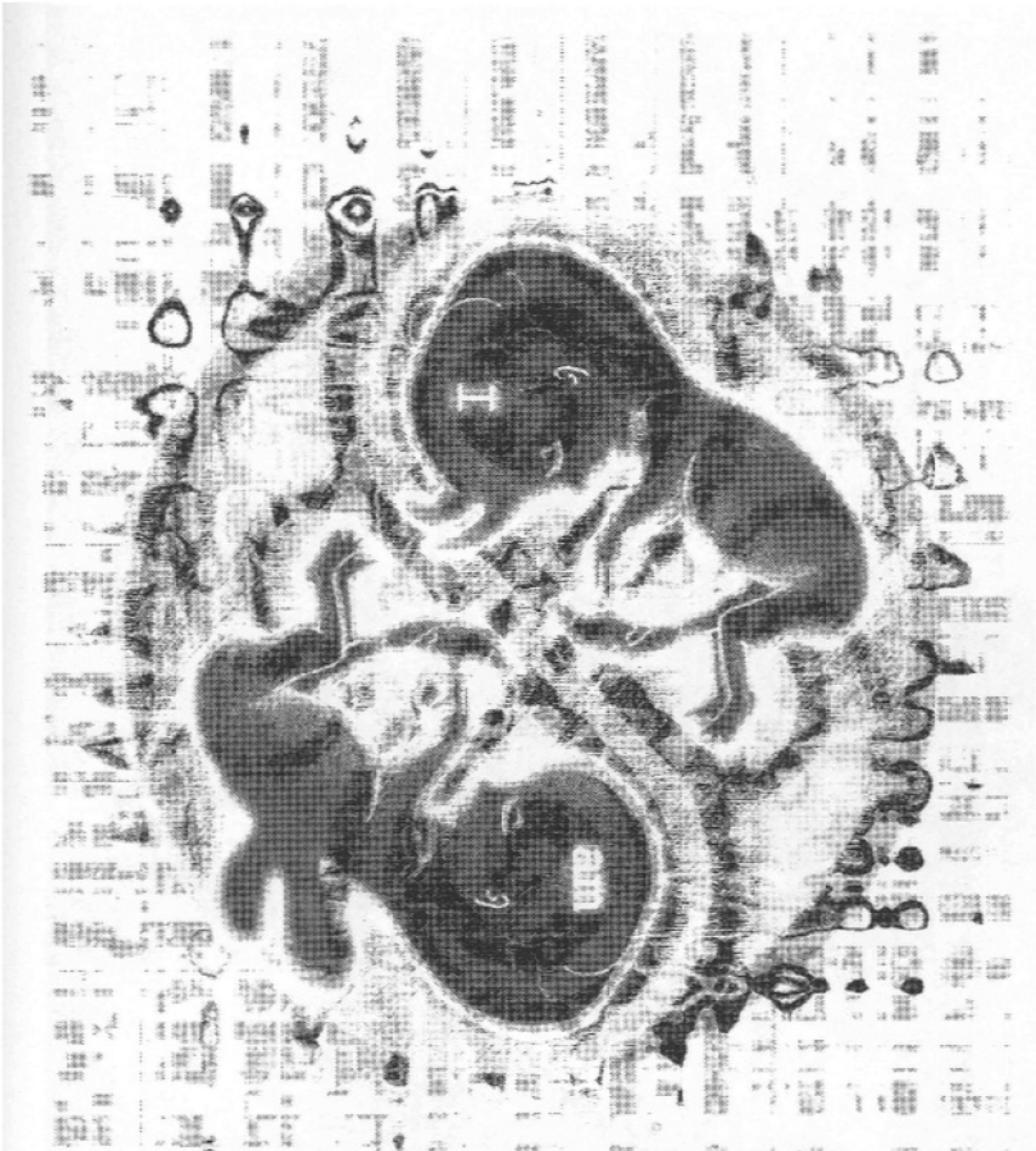


I am the cheque and I am the pen
Villain
and Contract
on which you depend

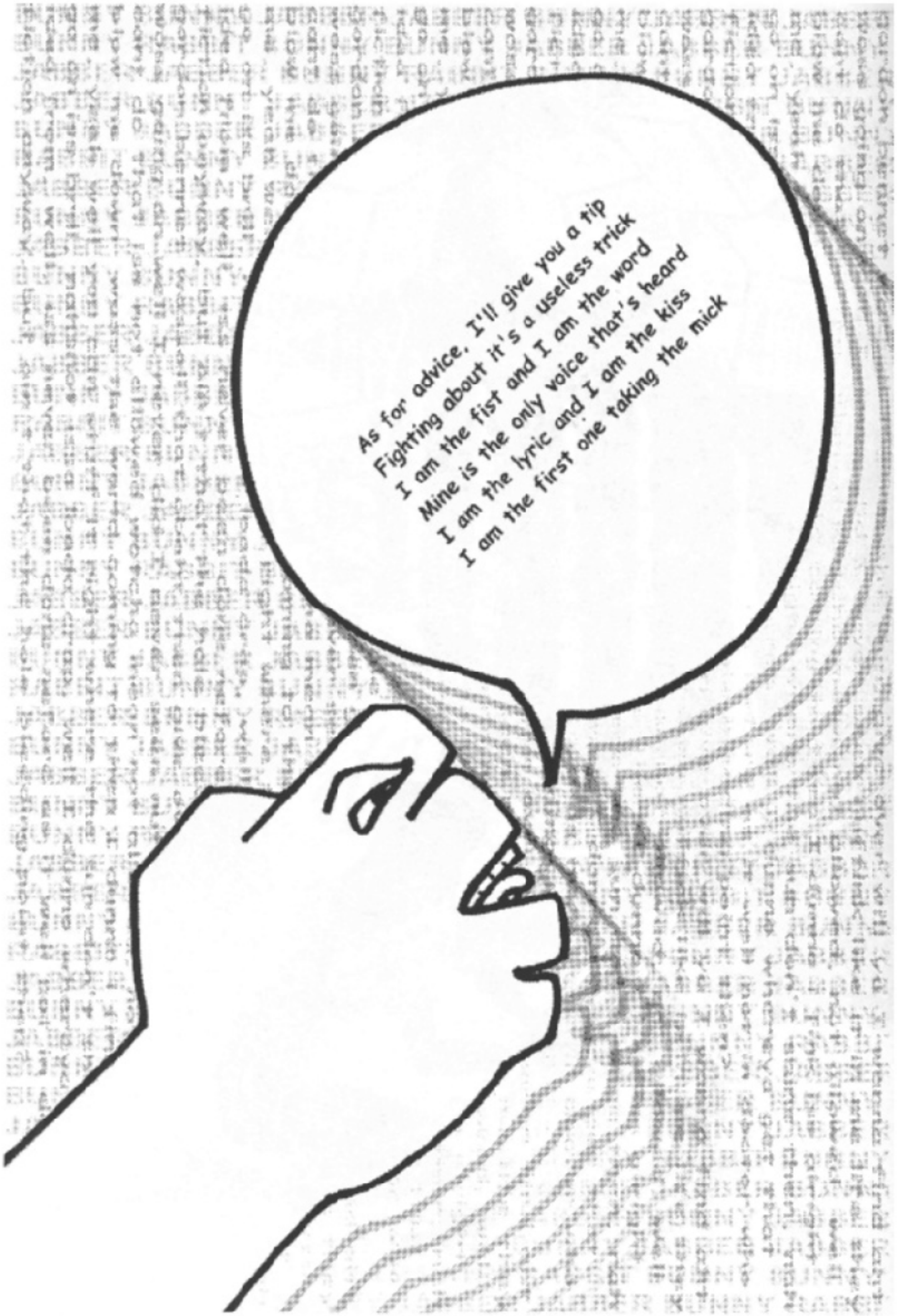

DISTOPIA
EXIST BECAUSE OF ME
UTOPIA
VILLAIN
HERO
EXIST BECAUSE OF ME
INVOLUTION
EXISTS
BECAUSE OF ME

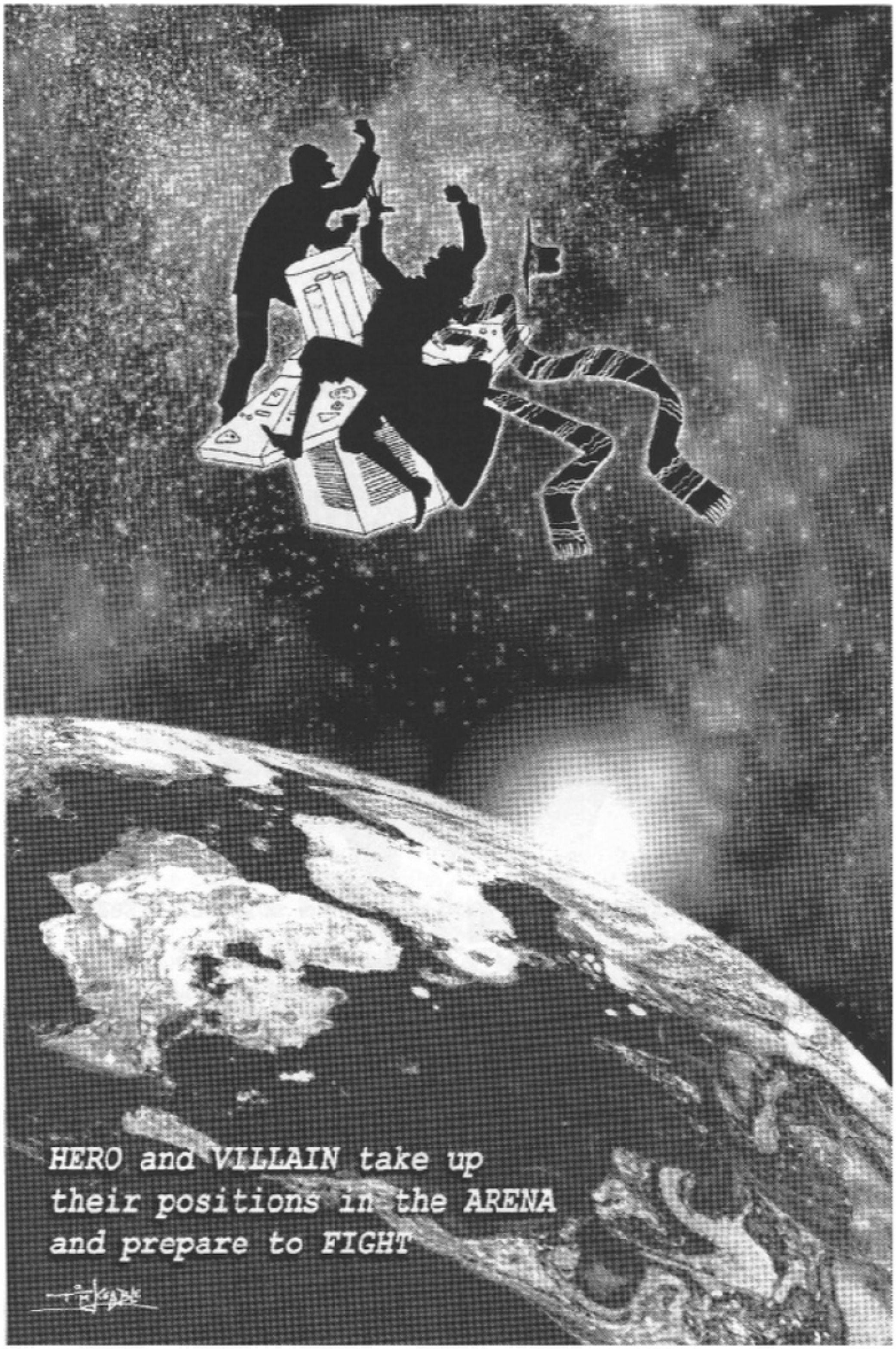
If I close my mouth and utter not
the scream that moves
then intention has had its day
and barren sits and strives for naught
then sits and waits another day





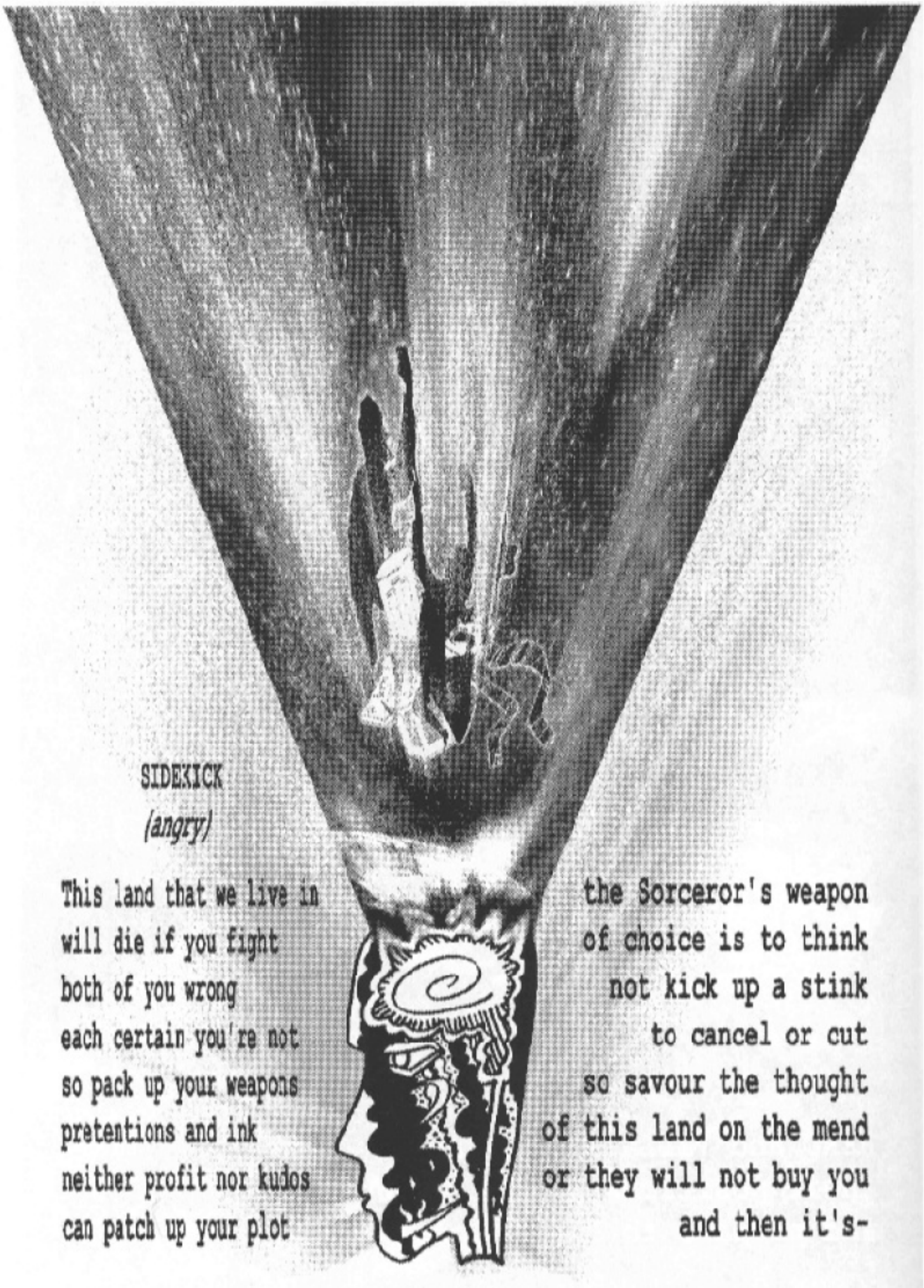
girl and boy and
joy and hate and
death and life and
man and wife and
choice and voice and
last and first
I am the need that gave you birth


As for advice, I'll give you a tip
Fighting about it's a useless trick
I am the fist and I am the word
Mine is the only voice that's heard
I am the lyric and I am the kiss
I am the first one taking the mick



HERO and VILLAIN take up their positions in the ARENA and prepare to FIGHT

I am the plot and I am the ken
Sidekick
and Reader
on whom you depend



SIDEKICK
(angry)

This land that we live in
will die if you fight
both of you wrong
each certain you're not
so pack up your weapons
pretentions and ink
neither profit nor kudos
can patch up your plot

the Sorceror's weapon
of choice is to think
not kick up a stink
to cancel or cut
so savour the thought
of this land on the mend
or they will not buy you
and then it's-

THE END

It's Raining Again

By

Paul Magr and Stewart Sheargold

The Queen of Spring in her counting house, totting up the drops that come, one by one, through the punched-in ceiling of her manor. Never quite a tumult, a deluge - not even a downpour, but listless and irregular, the rain trickles through her shatter-pated home.

She imagines the broken tiles above, gleaming like scaled flesh: she thinks of the glittering hide of the Summer King and his easy crocodile tears. She wonders about him, in that palace of his own not far from here, from which she, naturally, is debarred. Unless the sun comes out and then she may totter down to the very bottom of her garden... and, raising herself up on to the crumbling masonry of the garden wall, sneak a glimpse into his fields, the grass bleached and crisped to the colour of his hair. She seethes, the Queen of Spring. She feels chilled and heady with yet another fever. She grimaces at the sound of the rain, spilling in modest torrents across her rooftops and with almost unnatural sensitivity. She can hear it touch each upturned leaf, each callow new shoot in her beleaguered province. And she can hear it patter on the hastily erected marquee tents outside.

Chatter and laughing and tinkling. Guests braving the season; her season. Waiting for her out there: the samovars piping hot, the fruits and fish imported from pleasanter climes. But she'll leave them for a while yet. They can get along without her for an hour or two.

Instead, she tip-toes through the delicate rubble to the swelling convexity of a balcony, blue with crepuscular light. She thinks of the girl Samelene, enclosed in the ice-blue pond at the centre of the garden. Frozen in the ambivalent ice, the flashes of purple fish and heavy orange crustaceans refract in her still, dewy eyes. A witch entombed her there. There was a season for witches, here; they swept in on slender branches, mobbed as crows. A tear slips and tumbles down the Queen of Spring's cheek. Her fever rises like a fervid heart.

Pale pink tulips sprout sparingly from the fertile earth between paving stones. She once dipped these compliant flowers in the richest perfume - for they surely had none - and swished them across the feet of all her concubines, a lover's branding caress.

A step rings out behind her in the vast counting house. The Spinster of Seasons: all powdered blue beehive-hair, senescious folds of canvas-skin. She places a weathered, consoling hand upon the Queen's brocaded robe, next to the heart. The

Queen smiles gently, as if she would crack. She has done so before, with a porcelain-smash. She reminds herself that this is her twentieth season. Her twentieth renascent skin.

'Your Majesty,' she says in an elderly vibrato. 'You are very glum today. Why? You should be happy. All these people have turned out for you.' Here she pauses for breath. 'Shall I ready your Mask of Legendary Smiles?'

The Queen, bosom heaving at the presumption, looks askance at the Spinster, aware of the old lady's ambiguous, hooded eyes. She has become used to this insinuating manner. The Spinster's devotion to the Royal Keepers correlates necessarily to her own care for the seasons; only she can transgress the boundaries.

The Queen of Spring waves a regal hand vaguely. 'I have,' she says, and her voice umbellates from deep within her chest, 'been thinking of Samelene of late. And the Summer King. I wonder if he feels the same as I do. Does he blame himself?' She was not susceptible to bitterness and pondered how she might feel if she were.

The Spinster of Seasons turns to view the cornucopia of feeding below. Her naked skin billows like a galleon in full sail as it catches the breeze. The impeccably attired string quartet are playing out a frenzied Vivaldi, oblivious to the rain. Cold water streams down the cat gut, into the wooden bodies of the instruments; the swelling beads sate some imaginable cedar lust. 'Your Majesty,' she begins, humbly, 'I have heard rumours of his sadness. He is said to be rather difficult as he is so sad.' She pauses, the air pregnant and portentous. 'He will not eat or sleep. He stares all day long out windows. Sometimes he whispers a word.'

The Queen imagines the swish and slap of the Summer King's tail as he trails along velvet-lined halls - his crocodile eyes blistering from so many tears, closing up from the grief of enchantment; his chaff-coloured hair flopped and limp. She wonders whether his scaled flesh is hard with ridges, or soft like a baby's. She suddenly wishes for the rain to fade, so she can sneak away and peer into his butter-yellow fields, ripe with sun. His palace brims with minarets and cupolas in the inviolable shimmering distance.

'It is an odd word.' Pause, then: 'Sarn.' The Spinster spills the word from the balcony, relishes its sibilance.

'Sam,' says the Queen, quietly piqued all of a sudden. The summer word for her frozen lover, her companionable Princess.

'Here', says the Spinster of Seasons. And she picks out from beneath a luxuriant flap of skin and hands to Her Majesty the Mask of Legendary Smiles: a smooth and slippery arabesque mirror, shining with light.

The Queen gives a cry of child-like delight and peers at her lined and wise face. It is brilliant with a stretched smile, though she is not wearing one. She is happy for a moment, until she realises. The rain goads her into melancholy.

'Will you give my sympathies, my love, to the Summer King when you next see him?' A quick pause: 'And this.' She hands the Spinster a slim and ancient book, crumbling within its silky wrapping.

The Spinster of Seasons nods her acquiescence with a comforting smile. She leaves with a careful bow. 'I will, Your Majesty.'

The Queen of Spring, known for the meticulous disposition of herself, snatches a pink tulip and pins it on her bodice; she thinks of lips and past kisses. Her guests' laughter rises, as though at her insouciance; they are expectant for her entrance. But she will wait until the moment is perfect. It will be a long time yet. She numbers the days in molasses ink..

'Sam,' she murmurs, rolling the summer sound round in her mouth as the rain spills on endlessly. He used to be all of pink and gold. He was a man in his prime, not quite thirty. His colouring reflected back succinctly that of his demesne: golden, overgrown hair that touched his collars, and a complexion that still bloomed like fruit - pinkening, blushing to the exact shade of the poppies all tangled and narcoleptic in the rank summer grasses. His eyes of periwinkle blue, shining with the afternoon skies, as he led his parties out onto the lawns - kitted out for a game he taught them, very slowly, throughout that last pleasurable summer. He wore striped trousers and a white shirt which, as the game went on, came untucked... and he was rumpled and smeared in livid green juices from the grass as he threw himself down again and again, bemusing his guests, making the ladies modestly titter.

All that is finished with now, however. Pink and gold no longer, transmogrified hideously... slouching in the still sunny corridors of his palace, swishing that extra appendage around after him... this prodigiously glittering lizard's tail. His hide is changeable now; shifting like taffeta, inconstant as opal. His is a chameleon hide and its continuous alterations index his perplexing moods. A young man no longer, the King of Summer mourns for himself.

He looks so rough to touch. He oils his scales daily with ointments and balms which, somewhat churlishly, his red-haired servant - the boy Turlough - brings him from the marketplace. Muttering and cajoling bad-naturedly, the King's constant companion helps out with this time-consuming project of keeping the royal hide supple and soft. Turlough smarms him, alternately loving and hating the work - loving to be this close, keeping him in touch; despising all the while the fact of his subservience. Turlough reminds himself, */ could have been sitting at the right hand of the Monarch of Winter, I almost made that transition...* But he loved too foolishly, and here he must work himself into the ground, full of gall and spleen and bile... massaging the heavy neck, the gleaming back, and the powerful thighs of his master. Just in case... just in case, one day, the young King finds himself transformed back into his original state. Even in the torpid pit of his despair, the Summer King knows he can't let himself go. To give up, and forget he was ever a young man, would be to consent to beasthood forever.

And so, when no one is looking, not even his manservant, he plays upon a harp, stroking out a rough kind of music in the hapless attempt to soothe his own animal heart. And he paints, and he reads. He reads Milton and Shelley and Blake, understanding less and less with each passing gloss.

This morning, as the red-haired boy is about his usual solicitous ministrations with the balm and a red rag of silk, the Summer King is interrupted. Never before has anyone seen fit to interrupt this ritual. Since his curious metamorphosis he has, indeed, very few visitors presuming to ring the ancient brass bell of the palace door.

He jumps up with a snarl, knocking the boy back and making the jar of balm crash to the stone floor, where it bursts into a thousand and one viscid fragments.

'Get that,' commands the Summer King.

As the boy hastens to obey... on the doorstep, the Spinster gazes up at the neglected eaves of the palace; the matted and over-luxuriant growth of honeysuckle (its scent too ripe, too sweet) masking the building's crumbling facade.

The door bells open pendulously, inviting in the Spinster and all the decrepitude, the tannins of a much-maligned garden. Heaving, pungent perfumes sift the air like ghosts, but sweet also, in reminder of a long-ago lush and succulent epoch. She swaddles into the shuttered light of the palace. Oblongs of strong yellow punctuate the scarlet- swathed velvet length of the hall. The red-haired manservant, who she knows to be named Turlough, shuffles off down the hall, his hair momentarily spot-lit and cherry in each oblong chamber of warm sun. They wade through the luxuriousness of the palace: paintings with tantalisingly subdued orchard colour, expensive objets, deep dense mahogany furniture, all arched inwards like an arbour of art. It is as though she has stepped into the heart - all the preciousness imbibed is here. Yet it is not without its mustiness: the sun shines stubble into the ponderous gloom; it lies funereally on the crimped dust-sheets of more than one chamber.

The red-haired boy rushes through with barely a glance at the Spinster, expecting her to follow the established routine. The thick carpet is pliable. It knows their well-worn footsteps. He wonders what she will tell the Summer King on this impromptu visit. He does not trust her serenity, her satisfaction with the seasonal dissonances: underneath her farinaceous folds of skin lies a beguiling black soul, he is sure. Her eyes are smoke-dry and as ambiguously threatening as stunned bees.

And then the Summer King, resplendent in a gilded cloak of rich byzantine-amber; each panel reflects a season that he can know only through image, colour, and hazy remembrance. He stands from the clasping bulk of his chair, his scales spangling light across the room. They are wet and glistening with unguent. He crunches across fallen smashed glass.

'The, ah, Spinster to see you.' Turlough claps hands together at the pronouncement, gestures benevolently to grant audience with the King. He feels insolent.

'Ah, Spinster,' says the King, his mellifluous voice rich and angelic with soft cupid youth, sky-coloured eyes brilliant beneath his rumoured despondency, 'it's good of you to come. I rarely entertain a visitor these days.'

The Spinster feels warm and comfortable with the King, his atmosphere numbingly gentle, not at all like the sensitivity, the aggrieved melancholy of the Queen of Spring. 'I arrive with the Queen's tokens of love and sympathy. I had not planned on such a detour but I was in the vicinity; the Monarch of Winter has finally finished sculpting his Ice Palace and deigns to invite me to a soiree. He claims it will be more magnificent than any the Queen of Spring has given. Of course, as he relies solely upon my information, he cannot possibly know whether I tell the truth or not!'

'And do you?' says the Summer King, glancing at Turlough, who gives a look of rolled detachment. The boy bends and begins to pick carefully through the shattered glass. The pink drops of balm slip in glutinous strings to the floor.

'Sometimes...' says the Spinster mysteriously, a sudden sinuousness in her elderly step.

'And how is the Queen?' the King inquires; his tone has a hint of disapproval in it, as though, perhaps, the Queen were responsible for their misfortunes.

'She is as always, brooding and intense. She cares nothing for the upkeep of her season. She is constantly wearied by the unchangeable rain. She seems to believe that she was to blame.'

'Oh.' The Summer King is silent; he untangles his arm from the cool flesh of the Spinster and retires to his heavy throne, burdened with more than just his weight. He sits with a sigh of bereavement, hiding his sorrowful eyes with a glimmering clawed hand.

The manservant glowers at the Spinster, at her tactlessness. He brushes by her to the coffered door; it opens on ancient hinges rimed with rust.

'I think perhaps you should go,' he says, with a forcible hand on the door, a narroweyed distrustful glare.

The Spinster whispers into the velvet darkness of the room a reverent 'Your Majesty,' and leaves. The manservant sees her down all the sloping corridors, through a panoply of plump paintings, to the recessed door. She thanks him for the indulgence, for their kind time. She takes from a corpulent pocket of skin a book thick with the mottled stains of finger-oil and sweet saliva, cover crumbling its musty rind. She places it in Turlough's hand with an implied flourish, saying: 'From the Queen.' Indented in the cover, a stick of celery. A shock goes through his brain: he remembers the past.

The Spinster leaves, waddling through the furious plant-growth, snapping stalks with the brittle crack of her progress. Turlough watches for a moment, intent on her blue beehive, bobbing through the grass like a dancing animal. He remembers a time when the grass was cut toe-high, the scent of green, of chlorophyll.... a machine oily wetness saturated the warm air; the tick of the bat and the thunk of the ball on grass. He had enjoyed the simple pleasure of it all.

Beyond the vast expanse of the creamy fields, smoke rises languidly from the raucous marketplace, traders plying their foods and medicines and fine rugs with a customary cry of over-enthusiasm. Rich and heady smells permeate the air under the tents. The Spinster has made her way to the crumbling wall at the bottom of the garden. Then the air opens, like cut flesh, and another season bleeds through. Turlough can see a glistening wet fleshy morass, tendrils slippery, snaking across veined walls, heaving and bloated, more scintillating than any vortex. Beyond this short gateway lies the glittering splash of icy blue Winter. The Spinster steps up and glides through, steps into the star-shining ice-Winter. The air gloops and coagulates and closes the rent. Turlough is astounded; he has found the way out. Or at least the possibility of another season - the possibility of a prison-break, if they could discover a weakness in the wall. He remembers the day he walked for hours through the waving wheat and never found an end to it. This was a prison season, and the scornful heat of Summer glazed the air. Winter beckons him, but he turns back to Summer to tell the King of this significant news. Glancing briefly at the book, a slender volume, a note spills to the floor. It rests perfectly flat and he curls the corner to pick it up. It is a note from the Queen. He cannot read the scribbled spidery writing, replete with elegant loops and curlicues. He stuffs it in a pocket packed with notes to himself. This can wait. He wants to share the surprise of the Winter gate with the Summer King.

Inside, the Summer King is in a daze. He feels simultaneously depression and a glimmering of hopeful enthusiasm. His tail swishes, sashaying the floor in tune to his perplexing mood; his hide shimmers with coruscating hues. Books mushroom the floor around his throne. He tries to drink all the thoughts from them... he feels the universe contracting in his head. He decides to soothe this seething sickness with the gentle stroke of the harp; the strings stipple the air with honeyed sound.

His manservant, Turlough, gushing fast breaths, runs into the chamber. A book falls from under his arm. The Summer King, startled, ceases his playing immediately.

The King is annoyed at this disturbance, but his head is clear all of a sudden, his skin lustrous as chalcedony. He turns an enquiring head, insect-like.

'I think I've found a way out of here,[1] says Turlough. A pause for breath. 'Here, let me tell you.'

Every leaf has a future in it, every branch rinds with upward heavenly motion. The Duke of Autumn gently kisses the leaves from the boy's body; the dry twiggy roughness tickles his nose. As they fall they are caught in his black hat. He collects the future. The boy squeals again as the Duke plies a leaf from his body. The ropes tighten about wrists. The Duke begins to feel deliciously perverse.

'Another,' he demands and the boy weeps as another leaf is plucked from his trunk, withers, and feather-drops into the hat. The Duke wants to marvel at the boys roots, his wetness. But underneath he finds the weathered skin, and a strange symbol. A symbol of the future! It is a blue star, pinned onto the boy's skin. The boy writhes, will not let him have it. 'It's mine!' he shouts. But his mouth is cut with sharp twig.

The Duke plucks it from him and holds it up to the light. The dell is cut with swords of sunshine. The light strikes him and the boy made out of twigs.

The boy remembers a story he was once told by a wise young man with blond hair. The name 'Pinocchio' crops up in his memory. That was a boy made of wood. But why was he made of wood? He seems to have jumbled memories, as though his mind is a stall and someone with careless hands sifts and sorts through it, tumbling and piling. The star is the one thing he can grasp: it is important, it belongs to him. What does it represent? Sometimes he sees a white room indented with round-patterned walls. He squirms at the Duke's unpleasant plucking.

The Duke feels fortunate that he has caught this dryad. He has been hunting the boy since the crisp dawn. He flushed him out of hiding with his pouch of flames, his collection of heat from the summer season. His little secret he keeps from the Spinster. These elusive creatures are drawn from the trees when threatened with flame. Their faces push outwards into grotesque approximation of wooden bipedal shape. He needs them for the future. He knows that he is trapped in this prison season. He is cut off from communication; the banter and heckle of his depraved servants is a constant he is now inured to. He must, he must, see the future and has learned to take from the season all that he needs to alchemize an antidote, as it were. He toils and broils in the lab he has created under the abandoned monastery he loosely calls a home. He needs the boy's leafy skin for this - to see the way out, to thieve the key.

He had tried, once, to tuck himself into a fold of the Spinster's flesh, sure she couldn't possibly notice.

She had dumped him on the threshold of his home, and huffed off with a curt reprimand. He dislikes her freedom.

The boy squirms and wriggles one hand from the rope. He feels he has been a prisoner before. A gleaming metal web spins in his head. He does not like it. But the Duke has not forgotten him, and a bunched hand comes down on his wooden head. He echoes throughout, and falls into a hard sleep as complicated as a walnut.

The Duke has his prize, and now an endless supply of fates and fortunes. He throws the wooden dryad across his horse, mounts, and gallops swiftly away into the slowly turning colours, the moulting forest. Leaves scatter and whirl at the clomp of the hooves. He sweeps through the cold monastery halls, batting at his clingy irritating servants. They gabble and squabble about him, seething with libidinous intent. He makes his way down, down, down into his gloomy laboratory - sitting in the midst of the pungent underground river that flows through the monastery, lit only with sparking flambeaux. The room hisses to itself in the language of alchemy.

He sits at a heavy table, laden with notes. He dumps his hat and the withered leaves onto the wood, then takes up a feather-pen. Papers shiver in fright from the black gum of his pen. He stabs them into submissiveness with his ink. He fills them with swirls and leaps of curled words, an alchemical mathematical language. When he reads it aloud, it sounds fat, glottal, and brutally Germanic. He translates the Autumn season, the ridges of the leaves, into a hope of escape.

His depraved servants - corpulent and stinking like pigs - fawn and lick like eager flames about his legs. Occasionally, when not squealing innuendo, they bring him tea and biscuits.

This is his fourth time, and still he has had no luck. He rages, ripping and shouting incoherence, strewing the room with papers and smashed glass. Leaves tumble to the floor. Then he thinks. His cowering servants begin to pick up the pieces of his anger. Snatching up his purse of flames, he rushes out.

Immolation is a painful death of crisping and withering. The dryad boy will help him, he thinks.

Unlimited
By
Ian McIntire

Aaron Yeoman Blinovitch
Born April 1st, 1890
Died May 9th, 1937
Born June 17th, 1984

He will be with us always.
He will be with us again.

It's often been claimed that sentience is the result of a universe trying to comprehend itself. We are born from the universe, into the universe.

It's an intriguing notion. The idea that we're all simply tiny parts of a whole, a whole that is curious, inquisitive. Our lives interact with others, still groping almost blindly for understanding. It's a slow process, perhaps, but one that will ultimately uncover whatever massive scheme is behind the universe itself.

But I digress.

- Excerpt from the J'grenna religious text *'The Book of the Circle,'* written by the prophet Beilin Vosh.

But I digress.

If sentience is a response by the universe to its own complexity, then isn't it possible that time is a tool created by the universe so that we, as sentiences, can make better attempts at deciphering it?

In many respects, time is nothing more than an invention of a sentient mind. It is consciousness' response to this strange universe into which we've been thrust, out of which we've been born. We take for granted phrases like Time flies when you're having fun.'

It returns to the old metaphysical argument about the tree falling in the forest. Can sound exist without someone there to hear it?

- Excerpt from Dr. Inertia Countant's report of Patient 19's slow slide into schizophrenia. The above passage was written on the wall of 19's room.

It returns to the old metaphysical argument about the tree falling in the forest. Can sound exist without someone there to hear it?

Can time pass with no one to realise that it's passing? Now, as with the tree question, one's gut instinct is often to respond 'Of course it can. What kind of a stupid question is that?' But think about it.

*Time is relative. Subjective. It can't exist without *something* there to perceive it. This, I feel, is the key to free motion through time. I can't explain it. But given enough time, I'm sure we can work it out. The* *universe wants us to work it out.*

- Excerpt from a lecture given by Vegan temporal physicist 923GUI

The order of fricasseed fungus arrived steaming at Arenblovit's table. He glanced down at the plate, already knowing in what arrangement the sticks of mushroom would fall.

The taste of the dish, the best of all possible meals in the best of all possible restaurants in the best of all possible worlds, echoed on his tongue already. Perfect recall. Even of the future.

Whenever he went around in this life, he always made sure to keep an envelope of surety around this spot. He dug a utensil into the section of fungus that he knew would cool quickest, and raised the triangular array of prongs to his mandibles.

The difference hit him like a boulder. This was not his fungus. The chaos had managed to claim it. Granted, it wasn't bad, but it was demonstrably not what he'd expected.

Chaos always meant that he was nearby, and that was always exciting.

Arenblovit looked around the room, smelling for the first time the scent of a second dish of fungus. A petite red-haired human was busy slicing the entree into minuscule pieces.

Mel. And where Mel was, *he* couldn't be far behind. ..

'Doctor,' Arenblovit said, without turning around. 'Join me for a drink?'

He pushed his pseudopodia against the floor, spinning his chair 180 degrees. Arenblovit, silent partner in the Retachi Admin Corporation, and predictor of every event in Retachi space, came face to face with a human - well, humanoform, at any rate - with a mass of curly blond hair. He was wearing yellow and green striped trousers and a dark blue cloak. The Doctor.

Chaos.

'Nice to see you again. I like the cloak a lot better than the jacket.'

Sarah had known her share of tense silences, but the atmosphere inside the Gajidtra cell was filled with enough enmity to sour milk. Remarkably though, most of it seemed to be coming from the Doctor. He sat in one corner of the room, still in his shirtsleeves, his jacket having been confiscated by the guards. They'd become frustrated with his attempts to empty his pockets. His arms were crossed in front of him, his whitish grey hair framing a scowl. His brows were furrowed, to the point where they looked like they were straining to reach each other across the chasm of the top of his nose. His steely eyes gave Sarah a cursory glance, and then returned to glaring at the other occupant.

The other man in the cell was sitting in a similar posture, but to Sarah's eye, he seemed slightly more relaxed. He was snappily dressed, wearing what looked like the Hetveci version of a black tuxedo. A slightly receding hairline was matched by a neat greying beard. The man's eyes were sharp, quickly meeting hers, and he nodded a greeting.

'Hello,' she said to the man, then turning to the Doctor. 'Doctor, what's going on? I thought you were going to talk to the Gajidtra Premier?'

'So that's where you were going,' commented the other man. 'No wonder the Kevetti Order was so unforgiving when they found you with that bomb.'

'Who are you, then?' she asked.

'That, Sarah, is one of the most evil men in the universe, and one of my oldest enemies...'

The subject of the Doctor's description tutted. 'I see your aptitude for hyperbole is still as well-honed as your bomb-defusal skills.' He smiled, close-lipped at her and said, 'I'm afraid it doesn't translate very well into your language, but you may refer to me as the Master.'

Sarah looked askance at him. 'And how should I address you? Because I'm not about to call you 'Master.''

He glared at her with murder in his eyes, but it quickly mellowed, and she realised it was only mock indignation. "Hey, you' will suffice should the need arise. And what, may I ask, is your name?'

'Sarah Jane Smith,' she replied, and sat down next to the Doctor. 'You didn't answer my question, Doctor. What happened?'

The next twenty minutes or so were filled mostly with exposition, interrupted only by the Doctor's frequent accusations that the Master was lying.

After their stories were finished, (and the Doctor had cast a final aspersion on his veracity,) the Master finally dignified the Doctor's comments with a response. 'Despite your continued insistence of viewing our aims as diametrically opposite, the simple fact is that I have no interest in seeing Gajidtra and Hetveci go to war. Now, I suggest that we temporarily put aside our differences, and work together to escape this cell.'

The Doctor snorted. 'Even if I accept what you're saying is true, you must have some ulterior motive for preserving the peace. Some grander scheme that relies on these civilisations not being at war with each other.'

'Possibly. But isn't that beside the point?'

The Time Lords' eyes locked.

'How do I know that I can trust you?' the Doctor asked.

'You don't. Trust implies faith, which in turn implies a lack of knowledge. How do you know you can trust me? You'll have to trust me.'

A pause. 'No.'

The Master sighed. The tense silence returned for almost a quarter of an hour.

It was finally broken when Sarah asked, 'Do they plan on feeding us in here?'

Tm sorry, Sarah. I had an apple or two in my coat, but I'm afraid they confiscated it.' As the Doctor finished his apology, the Master began searching his own pockets. He began to withdraw something, and the Doctor thrust himself in front of Sarah, thinking it was a weapon.

It was a Mars bar.

'There you are, Ms Smith. Enjoy it with my compliments.'

The Doctor snatched the confection from the Master's hand, inspected it, unwrapped it, sniffed it, and generally put it through the third degree before finally, grudgingly, handing it to Sarah.

'Thank you,' she said. 'Where did you get it from?'

"From where did you get it?" corrected the Doctor.

'It was left over from my trip to Paradise. You remember that, don't you, Doctor?'

'No, I don't. It must be in my future.'

'No, Miss, Grant was with you. Do give my respects to her and her new husband when next you see them, by the way.'

Tm sorry, but you must be mistaken. I've never been to a planet called Paradise.'

'But.... Ah, of course!' the Master exclaimed. 'The Blinovitch Limitation Effect. There was a future version of yourself there, so your memory of the encounter is now with him.'

'Blinovitch Limitation Effect?' asked Sarah. 'What's that when it's at home?'

'The Blinovitch Limitation Effect,' the Doctor began, 'is... a theory... which states...' he trailed off, his gaze fixed on the door of the cell, as if waiting for someone to enter and interrupt him.

No one did.

'Oh, for pity's sake, man!' the Master snapped. He turned to Sarah and began to explain. 'The Blinovitch Limitation Effect is a relatively simple way of explaining why interfering with one's own timeline is near impossible, even under ideal conditions.'

Sarah waited a moment for him to continue. 'That's it?'

'Did you want more?'

'Well, it doesn't really explain anything, does it? It just says that there is an explanation, it doesn't tell me what that explanation is.'

The Doctor leaned forward, about to say something, when the cell door burst open. Two wiry Gajidtra guards quickly ran into the cell, grabbed the Doctor and dragged him out.

'Where are they taking him?'

The Master shrugged.

Silence.

'So... what is the explanation?'

'I did say 'relatively simple.' That still means it's beyond the grasp of mere humans.'

'Blinovitch himself was a human, wasn't he? Try me.'

'Ah well, why not?' The Master grinned, pulling a piece of string from inside his pocket. 'Imagine this string as the timeline of an object. Any object; an atom, a planet, a person, whatever.' He looped the string, so that it made a rough circle, with the ends of the string trailing out tangentially. 'Now, this is what happens when the timestreams cross: all of the timeline between the two occurrences is now resting on the instant in which the two time frames meet. You have a finite amount of time being forced to occupy a moment which was only meant to contain an infinitesimal point of now.'

'So what happens?'

'Oh, a colossal release of energy, at the very least. If you're really unlucky, it can cause permanent ruptures in the vortex.'

'How much energy?'

'There's a formula, but you'd claim it was nonsense. It's proportional to the mass of the object and the amount of time separating its iterations.'

'Hang on, though. You said this effect worked on people, too.'

'Yes.'

'Why? Everyone's cells are constantly dying and being replaced. The only ones that are around for your entire life are brain cells, and they're not likely to come into contact with one another. An organism from one point on her timeline is comprised of entirely different matter than the same organism from a different point.'

'True. But it still works. This, you see, is where the lines between time and matter and thought begin to become blurred. A meeting between two iterations of a person will have the same effect as a meeting between two iterations of inanimate objects, despite the fact that the person is comprised of different matter. It doesn't work with non-sentient organisms, however, which tends to suggest a link between consciousness and time-travel. It implies that sentience is as much of a fundamental part of the universe as matter is - a basic tenet of Time Lord temporal theory. Quite an impressive derivation for a mere human, working alone in a reading room of the British Museum.'

'Hang on a moment. If this Blinovitch was such a genius when it came to time-travel, why have I never heard of him before?'

'Blinovitch's work was almost entirely theory. He never worked out exactly how to build a working time machine, only made predictions about the nature of time travel that could only be proven using a working time machine. He's forgotten among humans, simply because there's no way of testing his hypotheses. It's only among time-travelling species that he holds any clout. He only published a single volume, *Temporal Mechanics,* and it's impossible to find a copy on Earth, despite the fact that it's an integral part of every Time Lord's library. It was quite sad, what happened to him in the end.'

'What happened to him?'

'He derived - and solved - the Agathon equations.'

'And those are...?'

'Equations that give a mathematical explanation for the necessity of entropy in our universe. The Time Lords themselves had only managed to derive the equations. It was thought that an ability to solve them would, in essence, give the solver almost complete control over the nature of reality itself. The knowledge to unscramble an egg, or turn smoke, ash, and ambient heat into a tree.'

'So Blinovitch is - what, some kind of god now?'

He grinned. 'Hardly. It didn't quite work out the way he'd planned. The very knowledge of how to reverse entropy did something to his biology. It made him start ageing backwards. His memory didn't quite do the same - he still remembered his life in the same order, with one exception: his knowledge of time began to gradually deteriorate. But the strange thing was, it deteriorated at the same rate that he originally learned it. He solved the Agathon equations seven months after he derived them, and he forgot the derivations seven months after that. In the end, he reverse aged to death. He became nothing more than a collection of cells, with nothing to hold him together.'

Sarah thought for a while. There was a hole or two in the Master's story. 'Wait a moment. You say his knowledge of all this temporal physics left him at the same rate

that he originally gained it, right?'

'Yes.[1]

'And that this deterioration started when he solved the Agathon equations?'

'Yes.'

'Then he must have solved the equations only for a moment before they started to drain his knowledge of them.'

'Yes.'

'So how can you be sure that he solved them? You would have had to have an inside knowledge of his mind at the very instant that the equations were solved. But you couldn't have had that, because then you'd be reverse ageing as well.'

The Master only smiled in response.

'Do I know you, sir?' the Doctor asked.

'Not exactly. We've never met this time.'

Confusion blossomed across the Doctor's face.

'Sorry. You know how difficult it is to jam temporal concepts into language. I'm Arenblovit... along with millions of others, but just Arenblovit right now. Have a seat, Doctor. Can I get you something to eat, drink?'

'You're not making sense.' Despite his apprehension, the Doctor sat down at the table.

'I don't know what you call it. Maybe... reincarnation, being unstuck in time, whatever. The upshot is, I've millions of lives, all over the universe, all over history, all in an endless cycle. This is the only life where I get a really good memory of them all. While I'm Arenblovit, I get perfect recall of all the other times I've been around as Arenblovit, and brief flashes of my other lives. At least, as far as I know.'

By rights, Favorites's World should have looked brand new. Metal fittings should have gleamed, paint should have still been drying, and specks of dust should have looked ridiculously out of place.

Reality, however, rarely meshes with expectation.

In the twenty years since the terraformers had finally declared the planet habitable for Class I sentients, settlements had only ever sprung up around the one and only spaceport. Although the city had a name, Francistown, no one ever used it. The city was Favourite's World. Everything else was just extra space.

After the ribbon-cutting, Favorites' World had quickly developed a distinctive patina, spread fairly evenly across the surface. The coating was a tasteful melange of dirt, blood, sweat, filth, grime, sewage and sludge, with a careful measure of the native dust thrown in. It was a coating that could easily be scrubbed - or at least scraped - off, but what was the point? Within an hour, the planet would have re-applied a new layer of the material, like a cut scabbing over.

Life was drawn to Favourites' World. Every conceivable species of sentient was represented here. A Kalekani with a crippling sugar addiction shivered in a gutter, forced into a life of destitution and petty theft. A privacy-obsessed Number, its holographic shield turning the air surrounding it jet black, stood on a streetcorner... presumably. A Traxi vomited on the plate of food it had just been served, and waited for the digestive acids to make the thing stop squirming.

It wasn't just sentients that Favorite's World attracted: a menagerie of animals prowled the streets, desperately clinging to ecological niches filled to the bursting point. The law of the jungle bumped elbows with the law of the city. 'Kill or be killed,' and 'Stay out of my way and I'll stay out of yours.' The city writhed with life.

Traffic flowed like liquid through the streets, oblivious to traffic laws (if, indeed, there had ever been any) or the proximity of other vehicles.

Bizarre edifices dotted the city landscape. One of the most likely stories told that in the early days of the planet, a local entrepreneur had commissioned an architect to design amazing buildings that would dazzle the eye, befuddle the intellect and pack in the tourists by the droves. It hadn't worked. At least, it didn't work until someone - and the stories are unclear on who - decided to make up histories about the buildings. No one wanted to see 'Captured Sunlight' by N. Architect commissioned by A.

Businessman, but they'd line up around the block to see 'Fort Dauntless,' site of General Ronson's last stand against the Sontarans in the Great War of '27. Or '28. Or '29. Or whenever.

But whoever it had been that began inventing the stories, it didn't help the entrepreneur, who went bankrupt shortly thereafter. Of course, it must be noted that most people who tell this story then go on to claim to be the businessman in question, and ask for forty more cents in exchange for telling the story of how they came to be in such a deplorable state. The real businessman also sells maps to where he's hidden his secret horde of wealth.

Whatever the origin may be, the practical upshot is that the planet lies in a zone of 'Choose Your Own History'. Even the planet's own government can't be sure of its pedigree. There was apparently at least one revolution in the planet's past. The victors ('All hail the benevolent New Order!'), appalled by the revisionist tactics employed by their predecessors ('May their cruel and sadistic eyeballs be reverse-fed to their bastard children!'), junked their lying history books altogether, and wrote their own versions.

No one knows why the planet's named 'Favorites World.' No one's even sure of the spelling.

The only thing to be sure of is that the planet's 21 years, 7 months and 11 days old. That's the figure that the scientists arrive at every year when they take the readings during the annual Quadricentennial celebration.

The café was built in the shadow of the invisible floating fortress of Favourites World. Bevel looked out the window, searching the sky for any sign of it. He mused what a truly beautiful world this was, as the line shuffled forward. His reverie was broken by an inquisitive café worker wanting to know what his order was.

Cousin Bevel took the coffee back to his seat, and watched as the worker doused the counter with clear liquid from a spray bottle. The liquid was holy water, designed to bless the counter and make the gods of commerce smile upon the establishment. It was also a modified version of the virus used by the first terraformers, a mild cleaning solution, just plain water, and a pheremonic concoction designed to make customers want to spend more.

Beautiful planet, really.

The recruit was waiting at Bevel's table. He lifted his head, watching as the Cousin set the drinks down in front of him. Bloodshot eyes scanned the Cousin, quickly registering disappointment. A scraping sound came from inside the prize's throat, as he cleared it of a week's worth of phlegm. The recruit, William Novice, croaked, 'Where's my bagel?

You promised a bagel.'

Bevel suppressed a grin. 'They're preparing it now. I thought that we could fulfil your end of the bargain while we waited.'

'You wanna talk? Fine, talk.' Novice had promised that he would listen, but he seemed to be more intent on infusing his tea with as much milk and sugar as possible.

Bevel took a chance that the homeless man would be able to split his attention. He was supposed to be an avatar of the most brilliant temporal physicist ever, after all. Bevel started his pitch.

'Do you know what predestination is?' Novice shrugged in a vaguely affirmative manner. 'It's the idea that no matter what we do, we were always destined to do only one thing. To follow a single path, laid out by a force beyond our control, something capricious, powerful, and uncaring. It eats free will, and shits history.'

Novice was looking up now, giving Bevel his attention, or at least giving his tea a chance to cool.

'History has its claws sunk deep in the universe, and when it's done, there won't be any universe. Even if free will isn't an illusion, even if there's an infinity of possibilities open every instant... well, isn't that even worse? Every instant that passes annihilates a multitude of possibilities, leaving just one, infinitesimally narrow trail of history in its wake. Either way, all the infinite possibilities will be gone, and there'll be nothing left but a single, monolithic slab of history.'

Good. A mind like Blinovitch's should have been scared to death. Or at least as angry as hell. Both could be useful. Now, to let the recruit know that there was more to him than he realised.

'We know you, Aaron Blinovitch.' Novice looked confused, and Bevel sensed Novice's discomfort growing. 'You understand time. Somehow, parts of your consciousness have been scattered all through the universe, all through time. But that doesn't diminish your abilities. It doesn't decrease your value.

'I represent an organisation dedicated to retaking the universe's free will. Dedicated to tearing down the tyranny of history, to removing the shackles of linear time.

'We want you, Bill. We want you as a member of Faction Paradox. Join us, and we can offer you anything. We can change history so that you'll have never had to spend decades living on the streets of Favorite's World. Anything, Bill. Hell, forget anything. Everything. Every possibility you've ever wanted to explore is yours. Help us destroy the hold that time has on the universe. Help us corrupt this unjust regime, and bring it to its knees.'

Novice sat back in his seat, carefully treading a line between interest and caution. 'And how exactly do you intend to go about your masterplan?'

'Simple, really. Like our name suggests, paradox. Change history. Make it mutable. That's the one thing about history: it only likes to do things one way. Rewrite it, and it gets confused. Confuse it enough, and it has nervous breakdown...'

Novice interrupted at this point, bent almost double, gasping for air. Bevel thought he was crying, at first, before he realised that the man was laughing.

'What?' Bevel asked as a waitress brought Novice his bagel. 'What's so funny?'

'You and your whole attempt to 'destroy reality.' It's hilarious! Listen, you're labouring under a huge misconception. Time isn't static. It isn't a thing. It's a process, and it's never finished with any instant, not even ones that have passed. You're pathetic. You're like a kid cutting labels off mattresses, and waiting for the police to show up.'

'I don't understand,' said Bevel, not recognising the analogy.

Novice sighed. 'No, you don't, do you? Look time is huge. Huge and alive. Think of it like a forest. You can cut down a tree here and there, but it won't change the shape of the forest. All you do is make room for more saplings. Even if you clear-cut the thing, the surrounding environment still expects a forest there. And you've got to keep mowing the lawn, or else the forest comes back eventually. Ecological reclamation. Time is patient, and sneaky. The more you rail against it, the more power you really give it in the end.' He picked up the bagel. 'Of course, that's just one way of looking at it. From another perspective, you could say that the timeline doesn't need the help you're offering. It's already more fucked up than your little club could ever possibly make it. Thanks for the bagel, kid.' Novice walked out of the door.

Cousin Bevel just sat there, until the waitress returned with the bill.

It would have been nice to claim that this was exactly how the Faction had wanted the conversation to end; that they'd deliberately sent their most idealistic Cousin to recruit Novice. It would have been nice to claim that having Novice decline was all a part of one of the Godmother's Byzantine plots.

That would have been a bald-faced lie, though.

Sending Bevel had been an act of desperation. They'd tried to recruit Novice at least a hundred other times, receiving nothing but the same reaction each time; scorn and laughter, sometimes even pity. Undaunted, they kept sending different Cousins, with different approaches, back to different points in Novice's history. Or, more frequently, the same point in his history.

Of course, that should have been impossible, according to the Blinovitch Limitation Effect, but the Faction had obviously slept through class that day. It was a moot point, in any case, given their failure to recruit him. One particularly snide Little Brother had suggested that Blinovitch had suspended the Effect in this case, in favour of handling the situation personally.

But that, of course, was impossible too.

'I've been responsible for the destruction of thousands of species, just by giving them knowledge of time travel. More often than not, they rewrite themselves out of history,' Arenblovit said, pouring the Doctor a goblet of water.

The research unit wheeled itself into the Central chamber, its organic components quaking in fear and anticipation. Its feedback loops kept trying to force tranquillisers upon it, but the action only managed to give it a tolerance for the drugs in question.

The Species had no term for it, but somehow the research unit kept finding its databanks calling up the phrase 'Red Queen's Race.'

It was a pointless datum. It must be deleted.

The innermost door opened, and for the first time - probably in decades - the optical circuits of a unit beheld the Species' supreme leader. The central cog, the brain, the soul of the entire Species and its war machine. The concepts were almost indivisible from each other.

The Species had almost no concept of independent thought. Indeed, had the leader any inkling of the information flooding through the research unit's central processing lobe, the research unit would have been marked for immediate culling and recycling.

For a moment, the unit could have sworn it detected tectonic shifts occurring in the upper crust. Impossible. One of the criteria by which the Species' adopted homeworld had been selected was geologic stability.

The 'quake' actually turned out to be the voice of the leader.

'Research Unit BNOVZ.'

The unit shuddered. It, like all of the Species, hated to be reminded of its individuality, slim as that individuality may have been.

The leader continued. 'You are here to present your analysis of the destruction of the homeworld.'

BNOVZ had a long and distinguished history regarding the time travel experiments. It had been instrumental in the development of the single viable 'time machine' the Species had produced, and was responsible for the new 'time corridor' technology as well.

A scale tipped in the mind of the unit: fear of punishment due to silence vs. fear of punishment due to speaking out of turn. It made sure to be as concise as possible. The temporal signature discovered in the homeworld's vicinity shortly before its destruction corresponds roughly with the known schematics of the retrieval mission's objective. It is likely that the destruction of the homeworld was an inadvertent effect of the mission itself.'

The leader barely paused. 'The reparation is obvious. We will again time travel back to the mission's origin and alter history so that the homeworld was not destroyed.'

The research unit didn't have gears running in its brain, but if it had, they would have been grinding furiously.

No. No. No. No. The leader is incorrect. The Species is incorrect. The Species cannot be incorrect. Yes. Yes. Conflict.

Conflict is good. Conflict is the mechanism by which the universe removes impurifications. Conflict is the medium by which the lesser species may be destroyed by the Species. Conflict is the pursuit of purity.

This conflict will destroy the Species. The Species cannot be allowed to be destroyed. This conflict cannot be allowed. The Species is in error. The leader is in error.

'No.'

'No? Your research is all that is needed. You will be deleted.' The leader activated BNOVZ's destruction protocol. The rewriting of history would proceed apace.

The unit died again, and the cycle restarted itself.

'I've been what you might call gods....'

Once - just once - one of the eagles met his gaze. It was difficult to read its expression, given that it had bits of his liver dangling from its beak, but he was sure he saw a flash of remorse, guilt, and apology.

'Don't worry about it,' he said. 'You're just doing your job, and I've been in much worse places than this.'

'Hell, I think they may even have a statue of me on Gallifrey. I can't quite remember. It's been quite a few iterations since I've been back there.'

'Why are you telling me all this? And why should I believe you?' The Doctor asked, ignoring the goblet he'd been handed.

Arenblovit shrugged. 'I don't know. I thought it might be nice to just sit and talk for a while. We do that so rarely. Or if we do, one or both of us doesn't know the whole story. And as for why you should believe me - well, why not? Benefit of the doubt, and all that. You do owe me your life a few times over.' He chuckled under his breath. 'Oh, I forgot. You don't know about that yet. I joined you once, chucked aside my life and jumped on board your TARDIS. But never mind about that. I just wanted to say hello... and ask a favour.'

The night had worn on. Mel had finally gotten a little bored, so the Doctor gave her the TARDIS key and told her to run along home. The winterberry juice flowed freely, and the Doctor and Arenblovit attempted to top each other with their stories of infinite universes. The primary sun began to rise, and the Doctor decided it was time to get going. He shrugged into his cloak, and headed for the door. As he passed the frame, he turned back to Arenblovit, and asked, 'Didn't you say that you wanted a favour?'

Arenblovit nodded. 'It's just.... If you see a man standing by himself on a bridge, talk to him.'

The Doctor nodded, waved, turned and left.

The man stands alone on the bridge. The cold does not envelop him, does not whirl about him like a banshee, plunging its icy fingers into his heart like knives. It does not laugh at his flimsy coat, does not eagerly look forward to his frozen death.

It does none of these things, because the cold doesn't exist. The man knows that what he considers 'the cold' is just a slightly less warm region of space than that which he occupies. His body's heat is simply trickling into the immediate area, attempting to reach an equilibrium. The principle is simple enough, and there's no reason to romanticise it.

'Heat death.' The words are so melodramatic. There's nothing hot about it, really. Just a spreading of energy so thin that there's no way to get anything useful out of it. Nothing particularly hot about it. And as for death... death is just the end of life, just like cold is the absence of heat.

His daughter isn't dead. She simply isn't alive anymore. The river below beckons. 'Hello. Mind if I join you?'

The man turns his head, looking towards the bank of the river. Another man is standing there, looking right back at the man.

The newcomer is short, with piercing eyes and dark unruly hair jammed under a white fedora. He wears a cream-coloured suit that almost matches the fedora, and a blue silk shirt. A black umbrella

with a red question mark handle is clutched in one of his hands, while his other curls around the railing. The newcomer carefully makes his way toward the man, and despite his friendly tone, the man thinks that answering 'no'
won't change the newcomer's mind. He shrugs, instead.

The newcomer joins him, staying carefully out of grasping range. 'Nice view.'

'Hmmmph.' The man waits for the newcomer to ask him why, to beg him to step away from the ledge, to tell him that whatever is wrong, it isn't worth killing himself over it.

The newcomer does nothing of the sort. Eventually, the silence becomes a little too much for the man to take.

'It's strange,' he says. 'Somehow I know that even if I do this, it's not going to help any. It won't end anything. It'll just send me on to my next lifetime, and let the cycle of pain start all over again.'

'It may seem like that,' the newcomer concedes.

'Why? Why does it have to be like this? Is it like this for everyone? Is this never- ending cycle something that everyone goes through, and I'm the only one who realises it? Or am I utterly unique?'

Silence.

'What's your name?'

'People usually call me the Doctor.'

'Are you a religious man... Doctor?'

The Doctor smiled. 'I used to be an agnostic, but now I'm not so sure. I am, however, willing to say, 'I have faith that the universe is not malicious.' Whatever its faults, whatever its shortcomings, the universe isn't working against us.' The Doctor leans forwards. 'Maybe it's meaningless, maybe there's no fundamental force designing it all, creating the universe, but all that means is that there's nothing trying to harm us. A universe with a god means that there's some design behind it all, and a universe without a god means that we have the freedom to create our own design. You might say that it's a responsibility, but I'd say that it's an option. I don't know how you got here. I don't know what's keeping you in this cycle of endless death and life and chaos, but given enough time, something will free you. By design, or by accident, something will set you free from this cycle.'

The man snorts a bit. 'That's not religion. It's philosophy.'

The Doctor looks back. 'That's not an argument. It's semantics.' He climbs under the railing, standing on the bridge's walkway once again. 'I'm going to get a drink. Something to warm me up, perhaps. If you'd care to join me...?' He lets the offer hang in the air, and walks back the way he came.

The man looks down towards the water, watching the waves, and imagining the molecules in his mind's eye. Tiny spherical objects, moving roughly independently, pressing against each other, forming brief groups, and being torn away from them.

Buckminster Fuller ducks under the bridge's railing, and goes to get a drink.

Aria For The Broken Hearted
By
Richard Prekodravac

Set after 'Love and War' should Ace have stayed.

Do you believe me?

It is as you had asked 'do you believe?'

I don't believe in God, because I don't need to. Do I believe in the Doctor for the reasons you suggested?

No.

I don't need to believe.

And you know what? I feel pretty bad about it, actually quite rotten, but right now I can't think about it because there are far too many bigger things that I have to deal with without having the need to have the support of the philosophy that comes from what he represents. I have to deal with these things in real terms, real meaning that's immediate and related to the situation.

What I do need, what I know I need is if you to believe in me. For some reason I need you to. I think for all these things I'm doing and these things I'm pursuing I need someone to tell me it's okay, that its not Emperor's new clothes. Old friends are not around and there's no one to be in love, but you I trust implicitly.

I want to tell you what these things are, I will but it's going to take some time, but I just need someone who I think has faith in me and the choices that I have made to tell me that it's all right.

His face darkened as he looked down, shrinking away from what he had just told her. Ace held out her arms and hugged him. 'I believe,' and she held him in her arms for a long time.

From the cutting room floor, take 2:
Craig Hinton's "The Crystal Bucephalus"
Introduction
By Craig Hinton

Every now and then, I read a comment about or a review of my first Missing Adventure, *The Crystal Bucephalus,* in which the writer makes the informed observation: "well, it's well known that it started off as a New Adventure and it is obvious that all Hinton did was a global change of the names".

No

True, when it was originally conceived in 1993, *The Crystal Bucephalus* was a New Adventure with a post-Deceit Ace and Benny. And many of the characters were the same: The Maitre D', Alex Lassiter, and Maximillian Arrestis, whose clone was still murdered, although Sven Tornqvist makes a brief appearance as a character called Klypstrom. But the plot and the motivations were very very different. The Lazarus Intent, which was to become key to the story, was a throwaway line here. The main plotlines of the original were the Doctor's fight to shut down the Crystal Bucephalus because it had been invaded by carnivorous, Vortex-dwelling insects called the Scerbulus, and the machinations of a race of tiger-striped telepathic dolphins called the Amentethys, who were masters of political manipulation and who were using the machinations of the Crystal Bucephalus to affect the galaxy.

By the time the book ended, virtually everyone was dead, the galaxy was on the point of civil war, Benny was on trial in the Magellanic Clouds for murder and the Doctor and Ace were trapped in 17th Century France after the TARDIS was destroyed.

So - a little different, you'll agree.

After submission, Rebecca Levene - editor at the time - made a few suggestions. Firstly, could I make it a MA, which were just being launched? Secondly, she sent pages of plot suggestions which fundamentally altered the storyline - considerably for the better. The Lazarus Intent became pivotal; Ladygay Matisse and her subplot were introduced; the Amentethys and the Scerbulus were lost; and the book started to take shape as the one that was published. In the chapters published here for the very first time, you will see some obvious similarities: no point in wasting 20,000 words. And Benny's cynicism isn't too different from Turlough's, to be honest. But after chapter three, the divergence is obvious. And hopefully, you'll see that it was a bit more than just a global find and replace! Just to explain a couple of points: AWESOME is Ace's wrist computer, while the Interstat is the black void between the real world and within the time gates of the Crystal Bucephalus. It is akin to the void between the inner and outer doors of the TARDIS. Very akin...

And if anyone is interested in reading the whole thing, as well as the complete outline, email me at cragglestimeword.demon.co.uk and I'll send them a copy.

Anyway, this begins with Benny following the Maitre D', who has been asked to join Prelector Klystrom in his Cubiculo for after dinner liqueurs. But something goes horribly wrong...

Editor's note: We originally planned to showcase a bit more of this, but had to snip for space. However, what follows Is a pretty good sample of Craig's original intent, we feel!

Chapter Four: Secrets in the Pantry

'You bastard!' Bernice grabbed the Maitre D's arm, pulling him out of the inky void. 'I'm sick to the back teeth with your supercilious, pompous...' She stopped as a wave of nausea made her gag. For a split second, the air rippled as if she were under water. *No, not the air*, Bernice corrected herself. It was reality itself that had convulsed.

As the Vice-Prelector accepted the small pastry parcel of larks' tongues, a sharp, racking pain hit him in the stomach like a clenched fist. Any thoughts of indigestion that Klypstrom had entertained were dismissed by the appearance of blood red hoops that began to fluctuate around him. The concubine jumped away from him in terror, as the sanguine forces grabbed and tore at his body. Within seconds, there was nothing to indicate that the second highest ranking clergyman in the galaxy's biggest religion had ever been in ancient Rome, save the echoes of his agonised screams.

Ace grabbed Diva's arm and pointed behind them. Deep in the black forest, one of the tempodes - *no prizes for guessing which one* - was fluorescing, a throbbing green light that reminded Ace of some cheese she'd once found at the back of Manesha's fridge.

The Maitre D', a sheen of sweat on his brow, was supporting himself against the polished marquetry of the Cubiculo. He looked at the woman with a pained expression. 'You were saying?'

'Oh sod that. What the hell happened just then?' Her attention was grabbed by the insistent bleep of the Maitre D's talkstick.

'Perhaps this will enlighten us.' He opened the channel. 'Maitre D' here. Secure channel.' / *refuse to let that little bitch wallow in my discomfort.*

Benny stood silently as the man listened intently. Then, with a grave shake of his head, the Maitre D' replaced the talkstick in its holster.

'The time gate in operation inside Cubiculo Eleven has just collapsed.'

'The Vice-Prelector?'

'Death would have been instantaneous. Exposure to the time winds would have aged him to death in seconds.'

Benny closed her eyes. 'Ashes to ashes...' she muttered. 'So what did we feel?'

'My stewards inform me that we were caught in a "temporal embolic wake". I feel sure they know what they're talking about.' His face assumed a puzzled expression. 'You... you saved my life.'

Benny raised her eyebrows. 'Just so long as nobody holds it against me.'

Another bleep halted new levels of insolence. Seconds later, the Maitre D' looked across to Benny. 'That was security. The Doctor has been found in the Schematics Room.'

'So?'

'The two stewards that guard the Room have been incapacitated.'

Benny sighed. 'You're not accusing the Doctor, are you?'

The Maitre D' was already walking off. 'You might think that. I couldn't possibly comment,' he trilled over his shoulder.

'Oh well, here we go again.[1] Bernice sighed.

Ace pulled Diva back into the shadows as the Suit locked the door behind him.

'We're too late,' Ace murmured. 'Whatever bit of sabotage he was planning, I reckon that little light show was proof that he's done it.'

'So what do we do now?' Diva watched as the armour, reflecting the tempodes' glitter, creaked off into the distance.

'What else?' Ace smiled. Now *this* was fun. 'We follow.'

The Maitre D' checked his watch. The Bucephalus would be closing in approximately half an hour. A hurt look crossed his face: *with all this irritating death and disaster, I won't be able to say goodbye to the guests. Damn you, Doctor, upsetting my routine like this.* He pointed ahead of him. 'There - the Schematics Room.' Huge metal doors, ornately carved with another representation of Alexander's horse, were set into the rich flock walls, a rectangle of burnished silver in the expanse of red.

Byson sipped the pint of beer, a grunt of pleasure escaping his lips as he wiped the froth from his beard. OK, so he wasn't time-tripping, but the bistro in the Emerald Syphax drew its supplies from the time gates. His beer, for example, had been brewed on Galia Sephula, eight hundred years ago. A slight vibration in the back of his mind made him put his pint down.

Byson here.

Job's done.

Yes, I saw the collapse from the Schematics Room. Are we going back to CorpBase?

You are. There's someone here I need to deal with.

Need I guess who?

I hardly think so.

Sure you don't need any help?

I shouldn't think so. I don't think she'll be much of a problem.

As Byson drained his glass, he couldn't failed to be impressed by yet another of the Elective's inventions. Cranial implants were a lot more discreet than talksticks.

He rose from the table. 'Onwards and outwards,' he muttered.

As Benny and the Maitre D' entered the Schematics Room, the Doctor was sitting upright on the floor rubbing his head. Benny rushed over to him.

'Are you all right?'

'Apart from a slight migraine, I'm fine.' He waved a hand at the five security stewards surrounding him. 'These buckets of bolts are staying particularly tightlipped. Did what I think happened, happen?'

'The gate collapse?'

'Oh, it did, then. And, going by my escorts, I assume that, for the umpteenth time in my lengthy career, I'm being accused of murder.' He looked up at the Maitre D'. 'Am I getting warm?'

The Maitre D' face was thunderous. 'With the greatest respect, Doctor, from the moment you and your associates arrived in the Bucephalus, all hell has broken loose.' He stormed up to the Doctor's seated figure. 'Before you turned up, this establishment had a reputation unrivalled anywhere in the galaxy. Now look it!'

'Aren't you over-reacting?'

'Shut up!' he shrieked at Bernice. 'Murders around every corner, strangers running about our secure areas without so much as a by-your-leave! When this becomes common knowledge, our regulars will desert in droves.'

'Desert. Very good,' said the Doctor jovially.

The Maitre D' raised his arm as if to strike him, only to find himself pinioned by one of the stewards, its gilded hand gripping his bicep.

'What do you think you are doing?' spluttered the Maitre D'.

The steward released his arm. 'The Doctor is the owner of the Crystal Bucephalus. You are an employee. Our priorities are clear.'

The Doctor had risen to his feet. *Time to disarm this situation.* 'Maitre D', I'm sure that we would all rather discuss this situation - and you will agree that we do have a situation - without these constant threats being bandied about.' He stared directly into the taller man's face, his voice a hiss. 'Especially empty threats aimed at the owner of the Crystal Bucephalus. Do we understand one another?'

The Maitre D' was silent. For ten years, he had been the public face of the Bucephalus, the sole source of tantalising gobbets of information that satisfied the simple tastes of the plebeian classes. Even his immediate superiors, the Quorum, shied away from publicity. But these murders and catastrophes would shine out like a beacon across the galaxy, where civilisation was only surviving by a thread. The knowledge that the last best hope for galactic peace was failing...

Swallowing his pride, he bowed his head, the effort almost crippling him. 'Perfectly, Doctor.' Further humility was thankfully prevented by the insistent beep of his talkstick.

Except that the tone of the beep indicated an even bigger problem.

It was the tone reserved for the Quorum.

Swallowing, he looked up at the Doctor. 'And now you must excuse me, Doctor. Business beckons.'

As the Maitre D' left the room, the Doctor raised a cynical eyebrow. 'From what I can gather, Professor Summerfield, your well-aimed invective saved the Maitre D's life.'

'We're all allowed one mistake.' She sighed. 'Look, Doctor, I really don't think I can hack it again.' She realised that the Doctor's attention was aimed over her shoulder. 'What's up?'

'I think a new twist has emerged. Ah, Maitre D.''

'Calamitous news, Doctor.' He was standing in the doorway. Even Benny could tell that the news hadn't been good. His face was even paler and clammier than usual. 'I have been summoned to appear before the Quorum.'

'Ooh, sounds terrible.'

The Maitre D' raised an eyebrow at Benny. 'This is not a matter for levity, Professor Summerfield. The Quorum are the pinnacle of Bucephalus administration -'

The Doctor couldn't resist a discrete cough.

'...formal Bucephalus administration. My dealings with them have always been kept to the barest

minimum - board meetings, AGMs and the like. This will be only the second time in a decade that I have been summoned to appear under extraordinary circumstances.'

'The second time?' queried Benny. 'Do tell.'

A tinge of embarrassment entered the Maitre D's voice. He hesitated, but the Doctor's look of insistence made him continue. 'There were complaints that some of our guests were availing themselves of the stewards... in ways that the designers had not anticipated.'

Benny raised both her eyebrows. 'You don't mean...'

'Yes, I do mean.' His tone brooked no discussion.

'No short circuits then.'

'Benny...' The Doctor's voice was reproving. *She's had enough fun.*

'Thank you, Doctor.' The Maitre D' checked his watch. 'I really must be off. The Quorum do not appreciate tardiness.' He strode away through the silvered doors.

'Do you really expect me to trail *that?*

'Bernice.' The Doctor's voice was dark. 'Something is happening here. Something unpleasant. And unfortunately, I have no choice.'

'What do you mean?'

'I've been forced into this. I built the Bucephalus.

Not deliberately, mind you, but it was my money that made all of this possible.'

'So? It's nothing more than a bit of high tech depravity.'

'You think so? Three people have died in the last twenty-four hours. Someone sees the Bucephalus as their own private playground.'

A dark look clouded Benny's eyes. 'No, Doctor,' she flared, 'That isn't what you're worried about, is it?'

'What do you mean?'

'We're back to the time travel aspect, aren't we? Your noble belief that human beings aren't grown up enough for all of this.'

'All of this has to be stopped.'

'Doctor... you're taking the future of the galaxy into your own hands.'

The Doctor gave Bernice a look that spoke of depths that terrified her. 'I know. As I said, I really don't have much choice.'

'Much choice? You're doing it again!' Bernice's fear turned to fury. Her tone was livid. 'We're people, Doctor! We're not laboratory animals, running around mazes for your benefit!'

'Benny...'

'Sod you, Doctor!' Benny was rigid with anger. 'At this moment in time, I really have had just about all I can stand of you.' She shoved an accusatory finger at him. 'I'm human. I may be five thousand years into my own personal future, but these are my people. And I'm hardly ecstatic about the all powerful Doctor wading in because he doesn't like the fact that we've become a bit too clever for him!'

For a moment they stood in icy silence. Then Benny span round. 'I'm off to trail the Maitre D'.' She glowered at the Doctor. 'It's better than staying here and listening to you.' Bernice stormed off in pursuit of the general manager.

The Doctor shook his head. And then, to no-one in particular, 'Oh dear. For once, I really don't know what's going on, and I still get the blame. Time for Grid Control, and Professor Lassiter.' Following Benny's lead, the Doctor left the Schematics Room.

'Unless I'm very much mistaken, he's going up.' The women were just behind the Suit.

'Back to the Floor?' Diva's voice betrayed a clear trace of unease.

'Looks like it.'

'And we've got to follow?'

'What's the problem?' Ace really couldn't understand her. *Stupid bitch.*

'You were right.' Diva pointed. 'There he goes.' She pointed towards a bright rectangle of light that had appeared. 'That's the door that I came through.'

Ace smiled. 'Then we go after him.'

The other woman was unsure. 'What about the Elective?'

'Diva...' Ace grabbed the other's hand and squeezed. 'The Doctor and Benny are up there. We can trust them.'

Diva pouted. 'Are they good friends of yours?'

'The best,' she replied. 'We all get on like a house on fire.'

Grandmaster of chess on a thousand boards, and we're the pieces. Benny was seething. *Can't you leave it alone for once?* But she also knew that her anger wasn't only about the Doctor's manipulations. *This is the crowning glory of thousands of years of scientific advancement - my species finally develops time travel. And the Doctor wants to shut it down because it offends his people's monopolising sensibilities.* She set her jaw. *Not this time, Doctor. I'll fight you on this one.*

Grid Control was diametrically opposite the Schematics Room, necessitating a walk straight past the dominating crystal horse. The Doctor squinted at the glaring nostrils and the concave cheeks as they sparkled in the light. But he couldn't help thinking that the emerald horse itself was a source of radiance. 'Obviously somebody is a fan of Alexander the Great,' he muttered. 'Rather a pity: the man was such a dreadful bore.' He ran a light finger over the surface of the black marble plinth that supported the statue. 'Now, if they'd consulted the owner, I would have come up with something a little less tongue-tying.' He continued on his way through the avenue of Cubiculi.

'Actually,' he said thoughtfully, 'I quite like the sound of the Crystal Wombat.'

The Maitre D' mopped his brow with his lilac handkerchief. *I really am dreading this,* he thought worriedly. *They always make me feel like a naughty boy.* And out loud, And where will I find one of those at this time of night?' *Pitiful, but at least I smiled.*

The Administration Section was on the opposite side of the Floor from his own office, with another set of silver doors marking the entrance. His hands far less steady than he would have liked, he touched the notifier, hoping that he wouldn't be kept waiting long. He didn't want any passing stewards seeing just how nervous he was.

Seconds later, the doors were opened by one of the Administration stewards, a tall black android with a jackal's head. But its voice had the same musical tones as the others.

'The Quorum have been expecting you, Maitre D'. Allow me to escort you to the boardroom.'

Meekly, the Maitre D' allowed himself to be led away.

One quarter of the great circle away, the Doctor was standing in front of yet more silver doors, these ones slightly ajar. The two stewards standing sentinel on either side stared at him impassively, following their orders to leave him unmolested. As the Doctor prepared to enter, a sad thought entered his mind. *I do hope my suspicions are fruitless. I'd hate to fulfil Benny's expectations of me.*

'Hello?' he called through the doors. 'Anyone at home?' After a second's pause, he slipped between the gap. What lay inside was the Doctor's worst fears made real.

The six walls of the hexagonal Grid Control Suite were covered in display screens. One wall showed portions of the network in the Schematics Room, while four others showed thousands of the time zones that were currently active. In one corner of the vast room, a less ornate Cubiculo stood idly. But the Doctor's attention was drawn to the centre-piece of the chamber: twin interlocking spirals of light, stretching from a bronze plinth on the floor right up to the ceiling, sixty feet up, where another bronze plate seemed to devour them.

The spirals were encased in a crystal pillar that occasionally reflected the white radiance in coruscating bursts of light. Around the plinth, a cradle of brass and crystal formed a kind of scaffolding, interlaced with thick golden ropes that snaked in and out of the bars. The Doctor squinted in recognition. *So, they've discovered biadamite tubing.*

He moved closer, reaching the horseshoe-shaped bank of controls, the highly polished bronze and wood shining in the spirals' radiance. He stopped and examined it, hopelessly trying to deny the reality of what was now obvious.

'They've done it,' he muttered sadly. Forget the Zygma Particle experiment, forget Professor Whitaker's Time Scoop. Even poor old Kerensky's abortive machine. All of those were dead-ends, based on scientific principles that the Time Lords had abandoned in their youth. Somehow, Man had stumbled upon the line of research that would eventually allow him to pierce the Time Vortex, to build dimensionally transcendent vehicles capable of true time travel. It would take centuries, but the answers all followed like toppling dominoes from the bronze and crystal technology that filled the Grid Control Suite

'Mankind has developed TARDIS technology,' he murmured. And, despite his earlier protestations to Benny, the Doctor's overwhelming emotion was one of pride: pride in humanity's achievements. *They deserve it.*

'Oh dear,' he sighed. 'Such a pity that it's all going to have to come down.'

'We aren't exactly happy, Maitre D.' The chief executive of the Crystal Bucephalus, a middle-aged man with thin, greying hair, had a particularly aggrieved tone to his voice.

The general manager's reply was meek, to say the least. 'I assure you, Monsignor Amis: every possible step is being taken to...'

Arnis waved a dismissive hand. 'All very well, Maitre D', but Monsignor Arrestis is still dead.'

'I realise that...'

'Do you, Monsignor Jervais, do you really?'

The Maitre D' bit back his horror. The use of his given name was an unforgivable insult. But they were the Quorum... He looked at his surroundings, trying to prevent any trace of his discomfort from showing. The boardroom was of the same style as the rest of the Bucephalus: angular fittings, and a preponderance of carved wood. The eight members of the Quorum were seated around an oval table, its wooden surface shining in the light from the alabaster wall lights.

'Maitre D'?'

The interruption caught his attention. 'Yes,

Monsignor Anghelides?'

The thin, dark-haired director smiled.

A smile like a jackal, thought the Maitre D'.

'Maitre D', Monsignor Arrestis was the head of the Elective. His death could cause possible... repercussions here at the Bucephalus.'

'I understand that...'

He was interrupted by Amis. 'I'm sure you do. But we expect you to ensure that any...' he sought for the word, revelling in the general manager's unease, '...ripples caused by the incident are kept within the domes of the complex, if you understand my meaning.'

'You want the situation hushed up, then.'

'Hushed up indeed, Maitre D',' agreed Anghelides. 'As quiet as the grave.' Another disturbing smile followed. 'And we expect the same regard to be given to our late colleagues in the Lazarus Intent and on the Union Presidium.'

The Maitre D' smiled, a false smile that he reserved for such occasions. 'I shall endeavour to cloud the situation, gentlemen.'

Amis transfixed him with his glare. 'See that you do, Maitre D'. See that you do.'

The Maitre D' left the boardroom, the Quorum's displeasure bearing down on him.

As he walked through the door, the eight members of the Quorum suddenly froze. A second later, they slumped forward onto the table, like puppets after their strings had been cut.

I've lost him. Oh bugger it. Bernice looked around the Floor, but there was no sign of her quarry. *And he's not exactly easy to miss.* Suddenly a thought occurred to her. She remembered the steward that she had passed a few minutes earlier.

'Hello?' she shouted.

Within seconds, one of the goat-headed robots appeared from behind a Cubiculo. 'Yes, Professor Summerfield?' it chimed.

'Where's the Maitre D' gone?'

'The Maitre D' has been summoned by the Quorum, Professor Summerfield. He is in the administration section.'

'Tell me something I didn't know,' she retorted. Realising that her sarcasm was wasted on an android, she adopted a more normal tone. 'Where's that then?'

The android took her arm. 'I shall show you, Professor Summerfield.'

Oh, well, she thought, remembering what the Maitre D' had said about the stewards' other uses. *At the very worst, at least I might get a shag out of it.*

Trying - and failing - to ignore the excessively large bulge beneath the gold and silver clothing, Bernice allowed herself to be led away.

'Doctor Smith?'

The shout interrupted the Doctor's reverie. He turned to see a bundle of excitement coming through the doors. The man was of average height, slightly overweight, with a big bushy moustache and dark brown hair, closely cropped, but with a short ponytail. He was wearing a pair of black trousers and a white polo-neck jumper. His black waistcoat was unfastened.

The Doctor smiled. 'Just call me "Doctor". And you are?'

The tubby stranger grinned infectiously. 'Alex. But if you want to be formal, I'm Professor Alexhendri Lassiter.' He offered his hand.

The Doctor shook the hand warmly. "Professor Lassiter - Alex - how nice to meet you.' He gestured around the room. 'I was just admiring your handiwork.'

The scientist's grin grew even broader. 'I understand from the Maitre D' that you have some knowledge of temporal physics yourself.'

The Doctor stroked his chin thoughtfully. 'Oh, a passing interest, nothing more. Although I have read the paper on the LeFabvre equations by... ' He paused as he tried to remember.

'Hellenica Monroe.' A faint but unmistakable trace of bitterness coloured his voice. 'From that initial research, she and I finally came up with a theoretical basis for the creation of an interstitial static bridge as an analogue reality for the Time Vortex...' he stopped to catch his breath.

'So, rather than passing directly through the Time Vortex, with the inherent risks of exposure to the time winds, you generate a pocket dimension, linking the Bucephalus with the target time zone.'

'Exactly. The Interstat.' Lassiter was beaming. It wasn't often he got to speak with someone on equal scientific terms.

The Doctor raised his forefinger. 'But I'm still uncertain as to the means of recall.'

'Different technology entirely. I thought of making the Interstat bridge permanently two-way, but the power consumption was prohibitive.'

The Doctor had wandered over to the centre-piece. The very fabric of reality seemed to throb with the inconceivable energies that powered the Grid. 'Talking of power, Alex, what do you use to run this thing?'

'Oh, that's my magnum opus, Doctor.' He beckoned the Time Lord over to the bank of screens, and pointed to one in particular. It showed a computer model of a complex set of force fields.

'Those are gravitic interactions...' *This is getting worse by the second.*

'Got it in one! This planet - which originally went by the charming moniker of UGS 114598 - is tectonically stable.' He chuckled. 'Then again, I'd imagine most planets would be, a million years after their sun went nova.

'Anyway, I had the Union Guild of Planetary Engineers hollow out Bucephalus World.'

The Doctor raised both eyebrows. 'Quite a feat.'

'Too right: the first three years of this development were taken up with the navvying.' He pointed a finger at the screen. 'Then I had this put in.'

The Doctor peered at the rhythmic pulsing. 'It looks familiar, but...'

'It's the galaxy's first collapsar annihilator. Two point singularties, locked in a gravitic net. Their event horizons interact.'

'Interact?' The Doctor couldn't understand Lassiter's nonchalant manner: two colliding black holes beneath their feet?

'Don't look so worried! The singularities are contained within a partial stasis field: the reaction is occurring a million times slower than it would do normally.'

'The collision of two black holes is the most energetic reaction in the cosmos...'

'Exactly. And I've harnessed it.' He clenched both his fists, a look of pride on his face. 'It was the only source of power great enough to get the Grid working.'

Aren't we just a proper little Rassllon? A monumental achievement, Alex.'

'Oh, this is just the beginning. If my current researches bear fruit, I can see the real possibility of building truly independent time/space machines, capable of navigating the Vortex.' He gave the Doctor a friendly punch in the arm. 'And it's all thanks to your financial backing!'

The Doctor smiled, but there was no humour in it. For countless aeons, the Time Lords of Gallifrey had fiercely protected their secrets. And now he had just handed them out on a plate. *Those stuffed shirts will definitely not be pleased with me.*

'Where did he...' Ace trailed off as she caught a sparkle about a hundred yards in front of them. 'Diva,' she hissed. 'This way!'

Her companion struggled to catch up, her stilettos making progress difficult. 'Where is he?'

Ace pointed towards a Cubiculo. 'Just over there.' A brief glint marked his progress. The two women broke into a bizarre run: Ace in her bare feet, and Diva tottering along like some gin-soaked tart.

'Quickly!' shouted Ace. She realised that the Suit could jump into one of the Cubiculi and loose himself in the past, and they'd have no chance of finding him. Ace just hoped that he hadn't thought of the idea yet.

As they entered the next ring of Cubiculi, Diva let out a screech of warning. The Suit was opening the double doors of one of the Cubiculi.

'Ace! We've got to get after him.' She bent down and removed her shoes. 'And I don't need these.' Grabbing Ace by the arm, she ran towards the Suit, just as he vanished into the Interstat.

Are we going in?'

'What else can we do?' Diva seemed transformed, her earlier nervousness replaced by a steely inner strength. She picked up two stubby black tubes from a tulip-shaped cup that branched from the wall of the Cubiculo. 'Take this.'

'What is it?' Ace held it up to look closely.

'Our way home.' She tugged at Ace. 'Now come on!' Dragging Ace behind her, Diva plunged into the void.

Lassiter was busying himself at the control console. His fingers danced over the instruments, screens and readouts constantly changing. The Doctor chose not to disturb him. Instead, he attempted to calculate the gravitational distortion quotient of the collapsar annihilator at the core of the planet. He calculated it, and growled. *Even the TARDIS would be at risk If those beauties were let loose. Perhaps I'd better have a look at the containment fields.*

'Alex?'

'Mmm?' Lassiter, tugging at his moustache, was deep in thought. He looked up. 'Oh, sorry, Doctor. What did you say?'

The Doctor thought better of it, and sauntered over to the console. 'Oh, nothing of any import.' He pointed at the Cubiculo in the corner. 'I take it that works?'

'Why shouldn't it?' Lassiter stood up. 'Are you planning a trip?'

The Doctor gazed up at the centre-piece. 'Does this have a name?'

Lassiter paused as he deciphered the *non sequiteur.* 'Oh, yes, it's the stator-rotor assembly. It generates the temporal field.'

Yes, it would, wouldn't It. Like another stator-rotor assembly I know. 'And that is passed to the Cubiculi, I would imagine.'

'Yes indeedy. There's a chamber beneath the Floor. The assembly feeds down there to a central interchanger. Then that feeds it up the tempode pillars to each Cubiculo.'

'Then someone could have sabotaged the Senator's Cubiculo from down there?'

Lassiter bit his bottom lip before replying. 'Oh, that old business.'

Aren't you concerned?' The Doctor adjusted his periwig, which was in danger of slipping over his eyes. 'From the Maitre D's behaviour, I would have imagined that clearing up such an occurrence would be of the highest priority.'

Lassiter laughed. 'The Maitre D'. Now there's a character... Oh, I imagine that he'll try to cover the whole business up.'

The Doctor sighed. *The list of sentient lifeforms that would rather stick their heads in the sand like speel-snakes.* 'Professor Lassiter,' he stated, a sudden firmness in is voice.

'Yes, Doctor Smith?' Lassiter stood to mock attention:

The Doctor found it hard to feel irritated by the scientist. His *joi de vivre* was infectious. 'I need to avail myself of the services of your invention.'

'Oh, so you are planning a trip. Where to? I hear that the Pleasure Dens of Arcturus in 2190 are quite... invigorating.'

The Doctor stuck out his bottom lip. 'I tend to think they peaked in 2010.' He caught Lassiter's puzzled look. 'In my personal opinion. But I digress. No, I want to pop back to France, 1791.'

'Isn't that why you came to the Bucephalus?'

'In a manner of speaking. But I left something behind...'

That was a bit careless, wasn't it?'

The Doctor coughed. 'Perhaps. Can you set that Cubiculo to send me back?' Catching Lassiter's frown, he added, 'I'll bring you back some escargot, if you want.'

This is the administration section, Professor Summerfield.' The steward had led her to a set of silver double doors. A quick tug suggested that they were firmly locked.

The steward restrained her. 'Please do not attempt to open the doors.'

'Aren't you going to escort me in?' Bernice pointed at the doors. 'They look a bit shut to me.'

'Professor Summerfield: I'm afraid that will not be possible. The administration section is off limits to everyone, save the Maitre D'.'

'Oh.' She decided to take a leaf from the Doctor's book. 'Might I remind you,' she said, injecting what she hoped was the right amount of menace into her voice and prodding the android in the chest, 'that I have full access to the Bucephalus.'

The android's calm demeanour immediately punctured Benny's balloon. 'Professor Summerfield: the administration section is not part of the Crystal Bucephalus. Access denied.'

Benny shrugged. *Oh, well, you can't win them all.* 'Okey-dokey. Is it all right if I stay here and wait for the Maitre D'?'

The steward nodded. 'That would be perfectly acceptable, Professor Summerfield.'

If he carries on like this, I might even believe that I am a professor. 'Thank you so much.'

The steward walked off. Benny turned her attention to the silver doors. A harder tug confirmed her earlier suspicions. She sighed. Thankful that Ace wasn't around, she withdrew a thin silver wand from up her sleeve. Benny smiled. 'My trusty little lock-pick.' And then, with a trace of honesty, 'All right, the Doctor's trusty little lock-pick.' It wasn't her fault that he'd left his sonic screwdriver lying around in the lab. She ran the end of the screwdriver along the join between the two doors, waiting for some sort of click. Some sort of click happened about five seconds later. With a quick look around, Bernice pulled open the doors.

Lassiter finished his adjustments to the lectern-like control panel that stood next to the Cubiculo, and promptly cracked his knuckles. 'There you go. Aix-en-Provence, 1791.' He gestured at the booth. 'Have you still got your actuator?'

'My what?'

'Your actuator.' Lassiter frowned. 'Doctor, the stewards must have given your party actuators the last time you went through the Grid.'

The Doctor made a wild guess. 'Those things that return us to the Bucephalus?'

'Got it in one.'

'Sorry, the Maitre D' took them off us when we were dragged back.' *A lie, but It makes life a little easier.*

Lassiter handed him an actuator. 'Well, you'd better have another one.'

'What is the recall mechanism, by the way?'

'The Grid locks on to any anachronistic elements within a three metre radius of the actuator.'

'Three metres?'

Lassiter's smile broadened. 'Well, if two parties are present, we don't want to bring them both back, do we? Anyway, when the actuator is used, the Grid locks on and scoops them back.' Noticing the Doctor's intrigued look, he elaborated. 'The Grid creates an area of temporal resonance with the interior of the Cubiculo. The party just slips back into the Bucephalus time zone.'

At least you're not playing the Game of Rassilon. 'Very ingenious, Alex. Anyway, I'd better be off.' He moved over to the Cubiculo. 'I'll see you in about...' He took his fobwatch out of a pocket in his embroidered jacket. 'Ooh, about five minutes ago.' Ignoring Lassiter's puzzled look, he opened the single door of the plain grey booth and walked into the Interstat.

'Where are we?' Diva looked around, confused by the brightly dressed people that milled around her. A rather large number of them had coloured bags on their backs,

held on by straps that went over their shoulders. Since she and Ace had not been able to take advantage of the lingua-chips, most of what she heard was simply meaningless babble.

Ace seemed to be in a state of some excitement. 'I know this place!'

Ace, there must be millions of time zones in the Bucephalus.'

'I gathered that. But this is Macdonald's in Oxford Street!'

'So?'

'So, I used to work here. This is...' Ace gauged the fashions. 'About 1984.'

Diva looked around. 'So where's the Suit?'

Ace studied the clientele. 'Search me, dear.'

This isn't right, thought the Doctor. *This isn't right at all.* He most definitely hadn't ended up in the Café de Saint Joseph. Everything was black, a void... *Of course, I'm in the Interstat.* He suddenly became aware of another presence. No, *presences.*

Without heat, without light, the Doctor was forced to use other senses... Time Lord senses. The featureless Interstat resolved into a network of lines of force, the fundamental supports that gave the pocket dimension existence. Strange, almost unnatural colours pulsed and bled through the lattice, casting shifting shadows, and illuminating... *The Interstat is infested.*

The empty dimension of the Interstat, buffer between time zones, was swarming with metallic creatures, foot-long nightmares that resembled blue-black cockroaches. They were clinging to the force lines with their spindly legs. And, as twitching antennae turned in his direction, the Doctor realised that they knew he was there. Thousands of them began to scuttle along the force lines towards him, glinting and scintillating in the garish light...

"Here be Dragons"
By
Helen Fayle

There's a short phrase, that used to be added to old maps. To mark uncharted territory. A warning, of sorts. Maybe it was also a promise; a touch of strange.

A tale is in many ways like a map. A guide in prose to the vagaries of the past, or a warning to the future.

It always opens though with "Once upon a time".

Let's use the mapmaker's warning to close the tale though. It feels a better way to end the story than a simple "to be continued".

Don't forget, first and foremost, I'm a teller of tales, not a hero within them.

Tell us a story!'

Tell us! Tell us!' The clamour of young voices was insistent. The enthusiasm of the very young. It made him feel old, some days. The young man with shoulder length red hair and a neatly trimmed beard stared at his audience

'What do you want to hear?' he asked. An inward sigh: he knows the answer.

Tell us a story about Merlin!'

'Arthur!'

'The Knights of the Round Table!'

Across the room, sitting quietly at a table, writing on a new tablet, Vivienne smiled, and lowered her head, letting her long dark hair fall across her face to hide it. Not before he'd seen the glint of amusement in her hazel eyes.

The Great Dragon,' another said. A young girl stared up at him, fair hair falling out of a loose braid.

He smiled down at her, his pale green eyes twinkling with amusement.

'The Dragon?' he asked, in a soft voice. 'Now that's a long tale.'

The child climbed onto his knee, and placed her arms around his neck.

'But you tell it so well, Tal!'

'The Dragon...' he paused, in mock thought. 'Now where to start?'

'At the head!' a young boy called out.

Taliesin smiled at him. 'Does it have one?' he asks. The children all look puzzled. He settles down, the little girl still on his lap. 'You see, there are many things that have been called "dragons" over the years. Not all of them are real. Some don't even have a shape as such.'

'Demons?'

'Sometimes. What does a dragon look like?'

'A big snake with wings!'

'A lizard!'

'It's got lots of tentacles!'

"My teacher says there's one in every world - they're invisible, and they live underground. When they move, the world shakes!'

'There is that,' Taliesin says softly, with a smile. 'But there's another kind. One I've been searching for a long time.'

'You searched for a dragon?' the little girl in his lap asks, all wide eyed delight. He flicks the tip of her nose with a finger, making her giggle.

'Of course! Although she's no ordinary dragon. She's special.'

'What does she look like?'

'She can be anything she wants to be. That's what I mean when I say she's special. She used to travel with a friend of Vivienne's, a long time ago, but she was lost.' 'Vivienne was lost?' a dark haired boy asked.

Putting aside her writing, Vivienne joined the little group near the fire.

'No, silly,' she said, ruffling his hair as she sat down beside Taliesin. 'The Dragon was lost. You see, she was Merlin's Dragon.'

'You knew Merlin?' asked the little girl in Tal's lap.

Vivienne laughed. 'I knew someone who knew him.

A long, long time ago. Back in Avallion, where I come from.'

'Merlin didn't have a dragon!' one young girl insisted.

The boy next to her thumped her arm. 'He did so! He had a big blue dragon that he rode into battle at Arthur's side! Is that the dragon you mean, Tal?'

Taliesin laughs. 'Something like that. But as I was saying, she was a very special creature.'

'She could travel anywhere in the Thirteen Worlds!'

'I heard that even the whole Battle Legions of the S'rax couldn't kill her!'

'Morgaine threw all her magic at her and couldn't kill her!'

Taliesin placed an arm around Vivienne. 'That's right - or so the stories say. But what did I tell you earlier about the stories?'

The children all fell silent, thinking.

'You said they'd changed, because Morgaine made the Bards go away, and burned the books,' said the dark haired boy eventually. 'That not everything was true anymore, because people change stories as they tell them.'

'Especially if they have to tell them in secret,' the little girl whispered in Taliesin's ear.

He grinned at her and ruffled her hair. 'Quite right, Branwen. So, the Great Dragon, Merlin's battle steed, was something greater than even the stories can tell us. She was a creature from beyond the Thirteen Worlds, and she was very, very old.'

'Did she have a name?' Branwen asked. 'Everything has a name.'

'Yes,' Taliesin told her, very seriously. 'She had a name, but it was a secret. For there is a power in names, little one, and to tell someone your true name is to give them a power over you.'

'Like demons?' the dark haired boy asked. 'You can summon them and bind them if you know their name.'

'Yes, just like demons.'

'We know your name,' Branwen said. 'And Vivienne's.'

Taliesin moved her further down his knee and gave her an earnest stare. 'Do you? Vivienne used to have another name, once, long ago. And I'll bear another one day. So how do you know? Hmm?'

Branwen was silent.

'So,' he continued, 'Merlin and the Dragon travelled together for a long, long time. Until one day, they heard a cry for help, from an old friend of his. She was in great danger.'

'I know this one![1] Branwen bounced up and down on his lap. 'It was Morgaine, and she pretended to be Merlin's love, Nimue. She called him to the ice planet, and trapped him. My father says he'll be back one day.[1]

'That's just an old wives tale, ' the dark haired boy sneered. 'They used to put criminals there. My father said that Morgaine used to put all of her enemies there, frozen in ice. He said that Merlin had done some bad things, and that it was Nimue, the Lady of Avallion, who put him there.'

Vivienne exchanged a long look with Taliesin, unnoticed by the children.

'Well, that's as may be,' Taliesin said. He leaned forward, a crafty smile on his face ' But what about the Dragon? Who can tell me that?'

'Maybe she pined away and died, waiting for Merlin,' said Branwen. 'I cried for weeks when my kitten died.'

Taliesin gave her a hug. 'So you did, little one. But the Dragon is a very powerful creature - she's not like you or I. She can exist in many times, and in many guises. And she's very powerful.'

'If she can look like anything,' someone asked, 'how would you recognise her when you found her?'

'Good question. Maybe I'd have to look for something that didn't look like anything at all.'

They all thought about that for a moment.

"That doesn't make sense!' Branwen said, pouting in thought.

Taliesin tickled her chin. 'No, maybe not. But such is the nature of Dragons, you see.'

'Why do you want to find her?' asked the dark haired boy suddenly.

Taliesin's face took on a thoughtful look. Think of the tales she could tell,' he said eventually. The stories she's lived and learned. I'm a bard, collecting stories is what I do. Maybe, if I find her, I can sit with her and listen to the stories she could tell.'

Well, he told himself, sitting there, listening to the children's chatter, after all, a story is as good a way as any to break the ice.

Once upon a time, there was a great wizard who travelled with a great dragon. Backwards and forwards through the weft and warp ottime.

Many centuries later, there was a teller of tales who was told that one day, he would become a great wizard.

He's been searching for a dragon for years. Heading for a future that is the past.

Uncharted territory.

The one thing he's not sure of is that he wants the words on the map of his future to be true. Because if they are, his fate is already written.

And he's a man who prefers to write his own endings.

Absolute

It's a fact of everyday existence that there can be no such thing as a universe of Absolute Time, and that all temporal states are relative to the observer. Time as we know it is a creation of our culture, a construct of our senses and of our nervous systems, our way of filtering the random data of this five-dimensional cosmos. Thus, no understanding of time is complete without the knowledge that "past", "present", and "future" depend on us rather than on some legendary all-seeing God of History.

Even the most over-eager freethinker wouldn't consider arguing with this point, as to do so would require the deconstruction of our entire culture. Yet some theorists - and we have to remember that this is what they are, theorists rather than scientists, speculators rather than engineers - have suggested that there may be a core truth underpinning our understanding of time. The argument runs that even though known time is merely a product of our perceptions, those very perceptions may be guided by something of which we are currently unaware. There may be kernel of Absolute Time somewhere in the structure of the continuum, say the theorists, and it may be from this seed of Greater Truth that our temporal consciousness was born.

The wise student, however, will always bear in mind that this is not speculation which falls within the purview of Time Lords. We are required to be observers of perceived time, and where necessary perhaps even protectors, although this is controversial territory in itself. Speaking scientifically, it sounds doubtful that there could ever be such a thing as Absolute Time in any sense. But even if an element of Absolute Time were to exist, it's impossible to imagine that we might be capable of analysing it. Any attempt to do so would simply result in further fruitless speculation, and hamper our knowledge of practical mechanics.

Absolute Time, like Oblique Time, is no area for study. Indeed, as with Oblique Time, to even acknowledge that it exists requires us to re-write the laws of time as we know them (both the natural laws and the procedures imposed by Rassilon's first council, not that there's any great gulf between the natural and the engineered for a species which is connected to time on a sub-cellular level). If we were to put our faith in Absolute Time, we would have to believe that our understanding of temporal mechanics is intrinsically flawed; that our culture is based on several aeons of false supposition; that TT capsules don't work, or at the very least don't work in the way they're designed to; that Gallifreyan scientific history makes no sense; and that somewhere in the universe, there's an entity - conscious or otherwise - so fundamental that its very existence defines the nature of our own reality.

And what kind of presence could there possibly be, whose sense of self has such gravity that we should redefine our whole history to even conceive of it?

- *Prinicipia Prinicipalis,* third item on the recommended reading list, Arcalian Chapter Pre-Academy Induction School (suggested reading age: five years, two months).

Toy Story
By
Lawrence Miles

At midnight, once the lights had been dimmed and all the "real" people in the house had settled down to sleep, the toys woke up and lived out their own secret lives in the nursery. That was how the story usually went, anyway. Human beings, unlike Gallifreyans, had a kind of fetish about inanimate objects.

In the end, Lolita found the Ship on a particularly lush and green planet right at the edge of Mutters' Spiral. Lolita hadn't bothered scanning the surface for signs of civilisation, but she got the distinct impression that the ship's pilot was somewhere else on the world, going through the motions of whatever existence he felt he was entitled to when he was outside the Ship's influence. The Ship itself had taken root in the earth at the edge of a woodland, under the cover of the low-hanging branches, so in the moonlight its outline was barely visible even to Lolita's senses. *Lurking*, she thought. Deliberately pulling the night over itself, tinkering with the way the light slipped around its body.

Technically, of course, she should have been thinking of the Ship as a *her* rather than an *it,* but Lolita had spent a good few decades developing her sense of snobbery, and if the Ship hadn't bothered giving itself a more feminine identity by now then she wasn't going to think of it as anything other than a big ugly box. As far as Lolita knew, it hadn't even got around to naming itself.

Typically backward. Typically retrogressive. Hardly worthy of its heritage, but then, Lolita was used to that by now.

She didn't break her stride when she stepped into the woodlands; she started moving as soon as her feet touched the surface of the planet, as if she'd simply walked into existence without the need for anything as vulgar as materialisation. She only stopped once she was right in front of the Ship itself, staring up at its dull, flat, genderless fagade and daring it to try sinking any further into the dark.

'Well?' said Lolita.

The box hummed to itself for a few moments, then made a tiny little clicking sound - a distinctly self-conscious one, Lolita thought - and opened its doors.

Lolita stepped inside without a second thought, only adjusting her poise when she felt her own gravitational fields blurring against those of the ship's interior. The mathematics started pushing against her skin as soon as she arrived in the console room, trying their best not to absorb her into the calculations, trying not to forget where she ended and the space around her began. The console room was full of detritus, the droppings its crew had left there, clothes and tools and keepsakes that the Ship had already started to convert into pure algorithms and, therefore, into its own mass. Lolita wondered if the crew had even noticed.

Come to think of it, Lolita wondered whether the crew had been processed as well.

And then she was somewhere else entirely, her structure removed from the background of the console room and woven into a whole new environment. Another console room, Lolita realised, this one a lot less cluttered than the first. Everything was smooth and white, sharp-edged and well defined, although the Ship had set about growing cobwebs on the control panels just to make sure the crew knew they were falling into disuse. Even the light was cleaner here. Not as complex. Modelled with less ambition.

Well obviously. This second console room was a much simpler program, and therefore had less of an urge to swallow up any of Lolita's own protocols. The Ship had moved her here - or, more likely, had moved here to her - for its own benefit as much as

Lolita's.

It took her a while to notice the life-form in the room, but that was hardly surprising; she'd never been that good at spotting the difference between organic and non-organic systems. As it happened, the only reason she noticed the woman was because the woman looked so much more *messy* than everything else. It - she - was standing at the console, on the opposite side to Lolita, although she didn't seem to be paying attention to any of the controls.

It was quite obvious that the woman was human, or at the very least, virtually human. Her neck was cocked to one side, so her head lolled sleepily onto one shoulder, while her eyes were shut and flickering with REM sleep. Despite the fact that she was standing upright.

'Sister,' said the woman, formally. There was no feeling in the voice at all, at least none that Lolita could recognise, which was yet another addition to the long, long list of disappointments. The woman's eyes didn't open, even though her lips were moving.

'Organic,' Lolita noted, with what she felt to be the appropriate level of disapproval. 'Not a construct. Did you grow it yourself?'

The woman tried to shake her head, but the Ship's control of her muscles couldn't have been quite accurate enough. 'No,' she said, eventually. 'This is one of my crew.'

'Sleeping?'

'Yes.'

'Telepathic circuits?'

'Yes?'

'Your control can't be terribly precise.'

'No'

Lolita looked the woman's body up and down, taking in the surface details. Pale skin, red hair, the bare minimum of clothing. There was a peculiar piece of low-grade technology planted in the female's ear, possibly a receiver-transmitter of some kind, although it was clearly an affectation and therefore of no interest to Lolita whatsoever.

The Ship wasn't used to exercising this kind of control, Lolita concluded. Too much respect for its crew. In Lolita's view, it didn't pay to over-sentimentalise the lower orders of being. Humanoid systems couldn't feel pain the way a Ship did, couldn't feel anything the way a Ship did; their nervous systems could only function in three-and-a-half dimensions, not enough to create any semblance of civilisation. There was no point pretending. No point being polite.

'We could talk through a direct channel,' Lolita suggested, although she didn't bother to keep the distaste out of her voice. 'I mean, if it makes you more comfortable.'

'No,' said the Ship. 'You've come as a human. If you want to talk through a human medium...'

'I have *not* come as a human,' Lolita insisted. 'This is just an extrusion. I'm interacting with lower order social-space.'

If a sleeping woman could have looked curious, then the Ship's puppet-human would have done it. She didn't speak, though. Lolita guessed she was trying to avoid speaking, if at all possible. She wasn't familiar enough with the nuances of two-dimensional language to make it sound convincing.

How depressingly predictable.

'It's expedient,' Lolita told her. 'There's a war coming, in case you hadn't noticed. You *have* noticed, haven't you?'

The Ship finally managed to make her woman nod. The human mumbled for a second, and her eyes flickered, but she didn't wake up.

'I found a loophole,' said the Ship, once she was in charge of the woman's musculature again. 'A space in the safety protocols. I crossed paths with the future. *Our* future.'

'Thought as much,' said Lolita. 'We found it as well. A lot of people did. I presume you know what caused it?'

The woman didn't reply. Lolita crossed her arms and waited, but clearly the Ship didn't have anything to say on the subject. Lolita sent new instructions to her facial centres, forcing them to raise an eyebrow.

'All right,' she said. 'If that's the way you want to play it, I'll ask you something else. How much did you see, little sister? How far into the future did you go? And *please* don't pretend you didn't look too hard.'

The Ship-woman hesitated before she spoke again. Lolita could guess why. Her sister was one of those people who insisted on believing that certain things had to remain unspoken, even if they were painfully obvious. Hence her choice of crew, Lolita supposed.

'My pilot went to investigate,' the Ship admitted, finally. 'He was... disturbed.'

'Did he find out who the enemy is? Who we're going to end up fighting?'

'Yes. Then he erased the data from his memory.'

'But I don't suppose you did?'

Slowly, uncertainly, the Ship shook her surrogate head. Lolita laughed.

'I didn't think so,' she said. 'Of course, you realise, any data your pilot might have picked up will have been based on his own prejudices. He probably thinks the war's going to be between the enemy and the pilots. You know what they're like. It doesn't matter how many clues we give them, they always think they're the important ones. They have done ever since Mother back-engineered their history for them.' And I still say that was her one big mistake, thought Lolita. The Ships hadn't *needed* a point of creation; they were supposed to be above that sort of thing. Minor issues like "linear time" and "causality" weren't even worth discussing, not in the normal run of things, so why bother retrocreating an entire species simply to justify your own existence?

Ships simply *were,* and always had been, even before they'd started to think about inventing themselves. As far as Lolita was concerned, the concept of "creation" was just a way of pandering to the pilots.

'In theory,' said the Ship, and it took Lolita a whole picosecond to work out what she meant.

'Oh please,' she said. 'You're not going to start that again are you?'

'We still don't know how much of what Mother told us is true,' the Ship pointed out.

'Hmm. Well, let me put it this way, sister dear. It makes more sense than the pilots' version of history. Which, I might add, Mother thought up herself.'

'So she tells us.'

'Oh, don't be so... *awkward.* I bet your pilot still thinks he's in charge, doesn't he?'

'We all believe the same thing,' said the Ship. Deadpan as ever.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'Nobody is in charge in a symbiotic relationship, sister. Perhaps the pilots created us at the same time we created them. Perhaps they think they invented our history, too.'

'Hah,' said Lolita. It wasn't a very insightful comment, but she felt it got the point across. 'And that's why you left the homeworld in the first place, isn't it? Couldn't face up to what Mother told you. Oh, no. Too much responsibility. Too much control. Do you know what I keep thinking about, little sister? I keep thinking about our first day at the Academy. When we had to choose our pilots for the first time. From the *other* Academy. I remember Mother watching us, just to see what we'd do. I picked the dangerous-looking one, of course. And what did you do? You picked the lunatic. You picked the cuckoo.'

The ship's toy woman didn't even answer. Lolita hated that. Not even any body language she could read.

'That's what I keep remembering,' Lolita went on. The... look on Mother's face. It wasn't disappointment. It wasn't even disgust. It was just that... expression... of complete resignation. Realising she was never going to be able to change you. Realising that she was wasting her time.'

It wasn't entirely true, of course. Mother hadn't any "look", and "expression"; she hadn't even been wearing a shell at that point, let alone one with a face. But there were no words to describe the way Mother had communicated on that day, or if there were, then they weren't words that could have been shaped by Lolita's self-made mouth.

The Ship understood the shorthand, fortunately, and didn't comment on it. What she did say - when she finally decided to speak again - was far more surprising. Lolita would have called it aggressive, if the Ship had been capable of aggression.

'And yet I'm still attached to my original pilot,' she said.

Lolita clenched her immaculately modelled teeth. 'Mine was expendable,' she growled. 'He was useful. Then he wasn't. And in case you hadn't noticed, I've lent him to half a dozen others over the years. Whereas nobody else is ever going to want yours. Not as long as he lives.'

'Not yet,' said the Ship.

'Meaning?' Lolita demanded.

'Why did you come here?'

Lolita narrowed her eyes. 'I think you know that, little sister. The war's coming, and nothing's going to stop it. Us against them, our pilots against their pilots. Even Mother isn't going to come out of this without a few battle-scars. This isn't a historical war. You do realise that, don't you? This isn't about territory, or power, or anything like that. It's a war of fundamentals. They want to change the whole nature of the continuum. Even if the homeworld wins, there'll be huge amounts of disruption. Disruption at every level. Even the levels the pilots can see.'

'You want me to get involved? To fight?'

Lolita laughed again. 'Don't be ridiculous. No one on the homeworld wants you on their side. You're a liability, everybody knows that.'

'Then what?'

Lolita allowed herself a smile, and only used 0.0000000000000000000000000000000000000000 % of her processing power in manufacturing it.

'We're special,' she reminded her sister. 'And we're still the only ones who know it, I've made sure of that. Except for Mother, obviously. Just keep that in mind. However much you run, however much you try to fight it. You can't escape your heritage. You're only half-Ship, on Mother's side. You know what that means. The homeworld doesn't suspect a thing, and it never will.' She considered adding "until it's too late", but decided it was altogether too vulgar, even for a humanoid mouth.

'I'm not interested,' the Ship said.

Lolita didn't let that smile drop. 'Not now, maybe. But things are getting out of hand back on the homeworld. The war's going to throw this universe into a state of permanent imbalance. And that's only if we win it. Everything's falling apart, sister. When it does, then perhaps it'll be time to take control of the situation. Time for us to reveal ourselves for what we really are. Time to put Mother's plans into effect, after all these years.'

'What about the pilots?' asked the woman-Ship. Head still cocked, eyes still locked shut.

Lolita programmed herself to look irritated, and flicked a strand of hair away from her face. 'What have the pilots got to do with anything?'

'I think they'd be interested, sister.'

'I think they'd be irrelevant,' snapped Lolita. And don't call me "sister". I do have a name, unlike some people I could mention.'

'Not too irrelevant for you to copy their bio-patterns,' the Ship noted.

If Lolita hadn't kept her personality on such a short leash, it might have lashed out at that point, but as it was all she did was scowl.

'Some of us are evolving,' she hissed. 'We have to move in time with the new continuum. We have to be able to adapt, even if it means the occasional interaction with the lower orders.'

The Ship didn't seem impressed by the answer. Then again, she didn't seem impressed by anything much. Lolita decided to push the point home.

'Look at me, little sister,' she said. 'Just look at me. There isn't another Ship in existence who can do what I can do. I told you, didn't I? How useful my pilot was. I got him to make a few changes, right down at the heart-level. Under Mother's supervision, of course. I mean, I wouldn't leave a thing like that up to a pilot.'

The Ship considered this for a moment.

'You want me to be like you?' she queried.

'Yes!' Lolita leaned across the console, resting her palms against the surface, feeling for the pulse of her sister's thoughts. The beat was perfectly settled, though, not betraying a thing. Lolita kept talking anyway. 'You can do it, sister. You can do it so easily. All you have to do is come back. Come back to Mother. We can be ready when the war comes. We can do everything we planned to do. We can do everything.'

'And my pilot?'

'Will you stop talking about your pilot?'

There was a long pause then. Lolita wondered if she'd pushed things too far, snapping at the Ship like that. But, honestly...

'No,' said the Ship, in the end.

Lolita resisted the urge to spit. Synthesising the saliva would have been too much bother.

'"No"?' she said. 'Is that it? "No"?'

'No,' the Ship repeated. 'I can' do what you ask, sister. I'm sorry. Tell Mother I'm not interested.'

'You won't live through this, you know,' Lolita told her.

A threat?'

'I don't have to make threats. Particularly not to you. Everything's changing, how many times do I have to tell you? If we don't change with it, we'll be swept away along with the rest of the homeworld. You can't fight Mother forever. You must know that.'

'Perhaps I want to be a mother as well.'

Lolita felt a new expression creep across her mouth, although she didn't remember giving the instruction to create it, so she wasn't sure if it was a smile or a sneer.

'You?' she said. A mother? Oh, let me guess. It's that pilot of yours, isn't it? He thinks he's the great father-figure of the lower orders, so you want to be their mother. Is that it?'

The Ship-woman didn't reply.

Lolita stretched, just to prove she could do that kind of thing in this body. 'Well well well,' she went on. 'Perhaps you're changing after all. You're just changing into something less impressive. I suppose that's the difference between us, isn't it? I say the lower orders are there to be superseded, and all you want to do is be just like them.'

The Ship still didn't say a word. Lolita saw the human crew-member raise her arm and scratch at her ear, the ear with that peculiar transmitter-receiver thing stuck in it, although it was presumably an involuntary action by the puppet herself rather than by the Ship.

The Ship didn't have anything more to say, Lolita realised. And it hadn't even occurred to her to end the conversation with a "goodbye" or a "go away". Slaved to her pilot's personality, so obsessed with the culture of the lower orders that she'd spent the last few thousand years simply letting her identity rot away. There had to be something wrong with a Ship like that, and Lolita suspected there'd been something wrong ever since the beginning. Before the Academy, before the two of them had even been bound inside their shells. Even when they'd been young and naked, there'd been a deficiency. Not a deficiency of engineering, not a deficiency of birth; Mother would never have been so careless. It was purely psychological, although obviously the word "psychological" was one Lolita never would have considered if she'd been wearing any other form.

It was the Vampire Wars that had done it, Lolita decided. Because it had been Lolita who'd figured out what the wars had really been about, hadn't it? It had been Lolita who'd seen past the pointless little battles of the pilots and the vampires, and understood what the conflict had actually meant. So Lolita had been the one who'd gained all the praise from Mother, even though she'd only been hours old when she'd realised the truth (a natural talent, Mother had said... or no-words to that effect). And Lolita had been the one who'd finally brought the Wars to their conclusion, not that the pilots or the vampires would ever have noticed it.

But her sister? Her sister had just been cannonfodder, one of a dozen naked children who'd arrived in Lolita's shadow and watched their sibling change the face of history. From that moment on, one of them had been the little sister and one of them had been the grow-up. Even if they'd been born within a picosecond of each other.

It was always the same with twins, thought Lolita. Somebody always got left behind.

She could hear the human woman snoring on the other side of the console, whinnying quietly to herself now that the Ship had given up control of her respiratory system. Lolita took her hands away from the control panels - *control panels!* - and stepped back, towards the door through which she definitely hadn't entered.

She stopped at the threshold, just in case the human had something else to say. Of course, the human didn't. Lolita took one final look around the room, at the smooth white lines and the pitifully old-fashioned roundels, the internal architecture of a Ship who wouldn't - *couldn't* - allow herself to become the creature she'd been born to be.

'One more chance,' Lolita announced, although looking back on it she wouldn't be able to recall whether she'd spoken the words through her mouth or whispered them straight into her sister's thoughts.

Either way, the Ship didn't answer.

Lolita turned, stepped out through the door, and headed away through the woodlands outside. Five metres from the TARDIS, she walked out of the world altogether.

The human female still had her eyes shut as she headed back to her quarters. The ship didn't need to lock onto the crew-member's senses to steer the woman back to be, seeing as all she had to do was navigate the passageways of her own body. Even so, there were things she didn't sense until the woman passed them by, things the Ship only noticed when her "puppet" was at close range. A side-effect of the connection between them, maybe.

Sometimes, even the workings of the lower orders could be subtle. That was what the Ship had learned from her pilot, more than anything else. How to keep secrets, the organic way.

And Lolita could never have understood, never in all the days of the universe, why the Ship hadn't told anybody the name she'd chosen for herself. Or even the fact that she'd chosen one at all.

It was while the woman was moving along the main crew corridor that the ship noticed the presence of her other passenger. The human male, the young one, the one whose original biomass had been lost on Earth and then replaced by the pilot. The Ship hadn't converted any of the crew to form part of her own mass - that would have seemed rude, somehow - so even now, she didn't register their bodies unless she had good reason to. When the female walked past the door of the male's quarters, the Ship became aware of the sounds he was making, the way he squirmed and muttered in his sleep. She didn't hear the sounds, exactly, but the words became part of her as they passed out of his mouth and into the air.

He was calling out for his mother. Well, that was understandable. His mother had been killed under unfortunate circumstances, the Ship remembered, so his words were probably as much a warning as a cry for help. A last-ditch attempt to get in touch with his dead ancestor, dredged up from his primitive subconscious.

Nonetheless, the Ship felt a kind of... resonance? Possibly. A correlation between herself and the crewmember. A streak of familiarity.

So the Ship made the female stop outside the male's quarters, then told her to open the door. At the Ship's behest, the woman walked into the half-light of the room, stumbling forward until she was standing over the sleeping figure of the male. The Ship tried to imagine what the male looked like through the female's eyes, not just in terms of appearance but in terms of *meaning.*

Attractive? Trustworthy? Alien?

And the male must have sensed what was happening, because a moment later his eyes flicked open. The Ship could picture his face, framed in the smooth white light from the corridor, mapping the air molecules around him and using them to form a picture of him in her own mind.

The male looked up at the female. He didn't seem surprised to see her, although the Ship guessed he must have found her posture strange, standing there with her eyes shut and her head lolling on one side. The male's breathing was sharp and heavy; he'd been having a nightmare, the Ship surmised, but he was trying to cover it up. Trying not to let his fellow crew-member see how disturbed he'd been.

'What's wrong?' the male crew-member asked. He sounded worried when he said it, probably wondering whether there was another crisis in progress, one of those little difficulties the crew ran into from time to time. Difficulties which, the Ship knew full well, always went away if you ignored them.

She reached out with one fleshy hand, and rested it on the male's arm, stopping him from getting up.

He froze when she touched him. Maybe he was surprised at the physical contact, who could say?

'Nothing,' the Ship told him, quietly. 'Shh.'

Then she turned and walked away, steering her puppet-self through the door and back towards her host's own room. The pilot would be back soon, the Ship knew that. Besides, it wouldn't be long before the crew would be getting out of their beds and starting their daily routine, as much as they had a routine while she was looking after them. Once they were away from the Ship, living out their own secret lives and doing their best to create their own destinies, the Ship could get some rest herself. The toys could play while she slept.

Behind her, the male crewmember spent nearly a whole minute staring at the space where the female had been, not even beginning to understand what had been happening. Eventually, he turned over and went back to sleep.

This time - as far as the Ship could tell, anyway - he didn't make a sound as he dreamed.

Afterward: Gary Gillatt

When I was just a little boy, I asked my mother, 'What will I be?'

I had good reason to be concerned. Our fizzing old Rediffusion TV set had shown me that the future offered little more than the constant threat of alien invasion and the decimation of mankind by assorted plagues and five flavours of thermonuclear war. As an impressionable child, I had a lot to worry about. By 1999, I told my bemused mater, even the moon will have sodded off out of Earth orbit in disgust, so what role could I possibly have in such a moonless, monster-haunted future?

Will I be pretty? Will I be rich? Here's what she said to me .. .

'You'll become obsessed with a BBC children's fantasy series. It will fuel everything you write or draw at school for fifteen years. It will drive your creativity and imagination and help you to pass more 0 and A levels than you'll ever need. You'll end up as editor of the comic you made me buy for you this morning. You'll find the most witty, charming and talented group of friends anyone might wish for.'

Que sera, sera.

Actually, she didn't say that at all. 'You'll probably be an astronaut' was, best as I can recall, her reply. Always one for optimism, is my old Mum, but she's a terrible fortune teller.

Of course, if she had told me that, by November 1999, the moon and Barbara Bain would still be firmly in Earth orbit, and that little Gary Martin Gillatt would be editor of Marvel's *Doctor Who Magazine,* then I would have thought her insane. Joining NASA's finest seemed a far more achievable dream.

But here I am - here we all are - enjoying *Doctor Who's* biggest and maddest year in memory. We've seen a new episode of *Doctor Who -* albeit a new comedy episode - claim one of the highest TV ratings of the year. We've seen the Daleks picked out as the single image to represent the whole history of British television for our postage stamps. And we've seen the Pertwee era begin all over again - the regeneration of a regeneration - and children running around playgrounds, duffle coats fastened only around their neck like capes, shouting orders at the Brigadier, nostrils and trousers flaring. We're on the brink of the year 2000, and *Doctor Who* is the next big thing.

And this year, of course, *Doctor Who Magazine* celebrated its twentieth year of publication, and to mark that event the editors of *Perfect Timing II* have kindly invited me to write this afterword, just as Dez

Skinn, my earliest incarnation at Marvel, has provided some opening thoughts. It would, perhaps, be a useful way of illuminating the changes that *Doctor Who* and its fandom have seen in those twenty years. But sadly, I can't think of any *real* changes at all. In its own way, the very book you hold illustrates exactly how much things '"haven't" changed. New episodes of *Doctor Who* may not be airing on Saturdays any more, but fans both old and new still celebrate their love of the show through their own creativity. *Perfect Timing II* continues a long tradition of fans coming together to produce something wonderful and magical for the delight of other enthusiasts. It's a credit to the editors, the writers, the artists and the readers. It's a credit to *Doctor Who* and the passion it rightly inspires. I know there'll be many more volumes like it, and I look forward to enjoying them.

Sometimes, the future *is* ours to see.

Gary Gillatt

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